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Wm. B. Mowery • Richard Wormser

ARGOSY

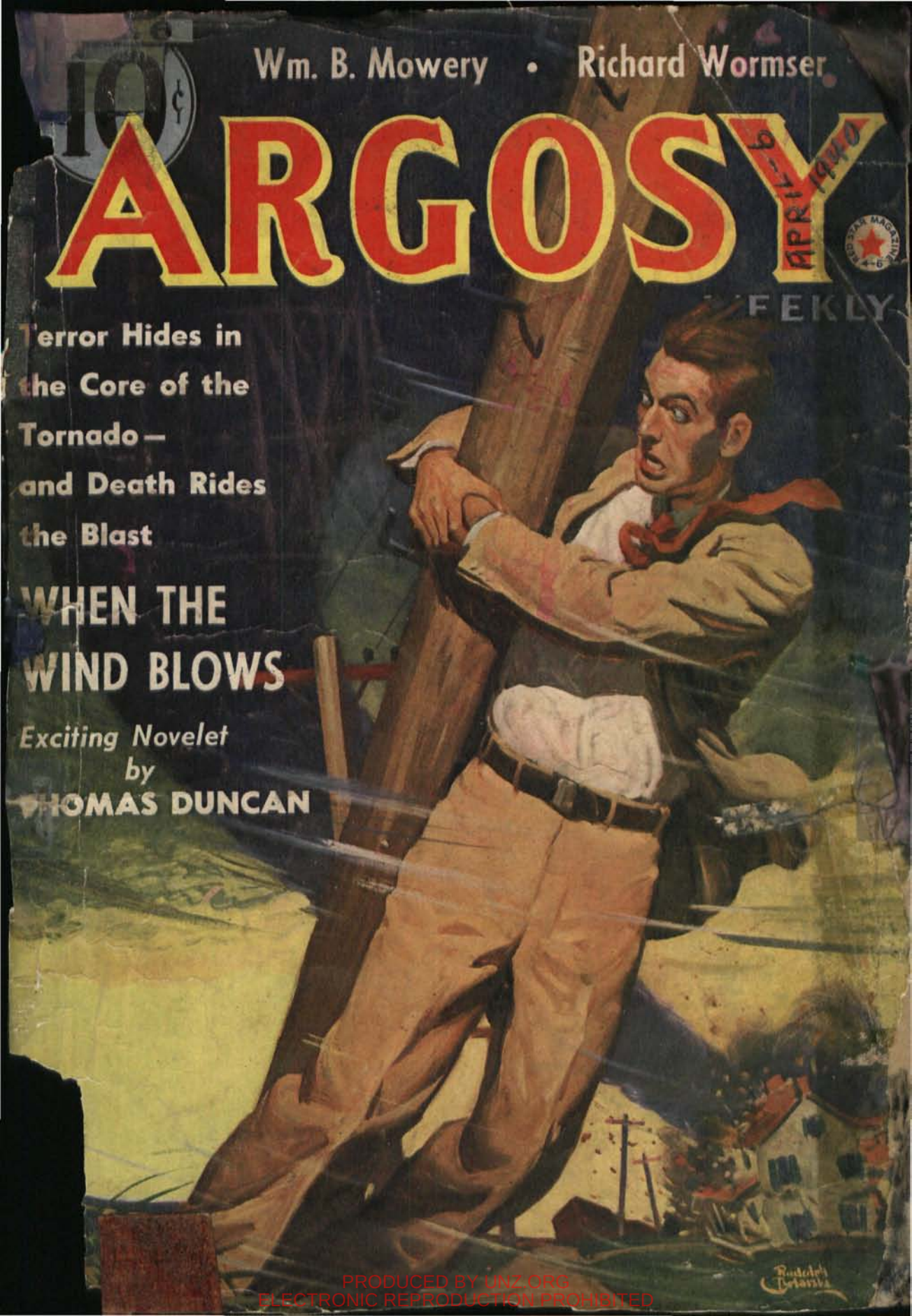
APRIL 6 1940

WEEKLY

Terror Hides in the Core of the Tornado— and Death Rides the Blast

WHEN THE WIND BLOWS

Exciting Novelet
by
THOMAS DUNCAN



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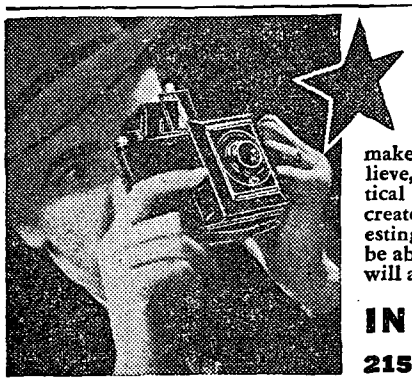

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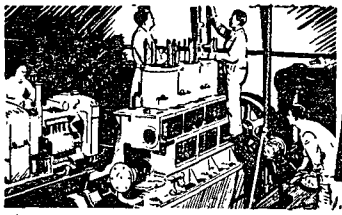

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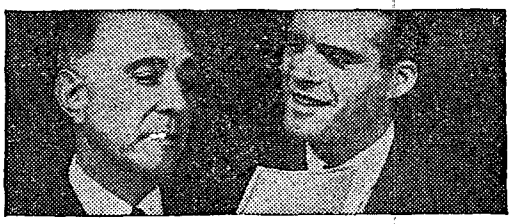

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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 298 CONTENTS FOR APRIL 6, 1940 Number 2

When the Wind Blows—*Novelet*.....Thomas W. Duncan 6
It was a peaceful little town until the twister struck. But the ex-convict-evangelist could have told them: Those men who sow in the dark shall reap the whirlwind

Justice Plays Too Rough—*Short Story*.....Foster-Harris 29
When Paradise is a Texas oil town, then Righteousness is upheld with dynamite

$1,000 Every Thursday—*Third of five parts*.....Jack Byrne 43
Wash your face, yokel—and get ready to go millionaire

Detour, Mr. Darwin—*Novelet*.....Richard Wormser 63
Four-alarm shambles, starring Molly the Monk and Myrtle the Mime

Butcher Bird—*Short Story*.....William Byron Mowery 78
Meet Captain Bo; twenty-five years he stood over a chain gang, ready and waiting to do a goodness

The Sun Sets at 5—*Sixth of seven parts*.....Borden Chase 88
Rendezvous by boat, where the dawn comes up like machine guns

Men of Daring—*True Story in Pictures*.....Stookie Allen 107
Frederick Wallace—Underwater Detective

The Devil's Doubloons—*Conclusion*.....Johnston McCulley 108
So subtle in the law, so brilliant with a blade, the senor has set the Evil One himself to flight

Microscopic Optic.....Captain John V. Bogle 106

Argonotes 126

Looking Ahead!..... 127

Cover by Rudolph Belarski
Illustrating When the Wind Blows

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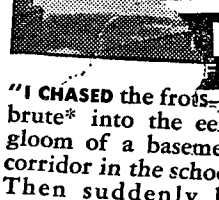

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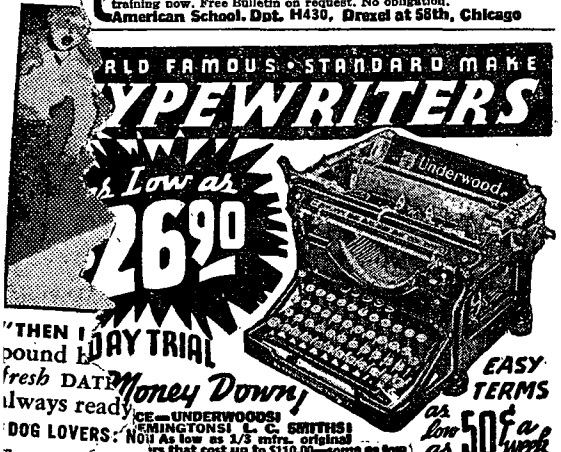
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When the Wind Blows

By THOMAS W. DUNCAN
Author of "Thirteen Cats," "Cable to Tahiti," etc.

Ed Gerrish went to God on the swirling wings of a tornado, speeded to Eternity by an ex-convict's prayer. But behind him Ed Gerrish left a mystery as dark and turbulent as the tornado he rode

I

IT WOULD have pleased him, I think, that headline we used over the story of his violent death: *Ed Gerrish Goes To God*. For at the very finish of his life he got religion. And like many a converted old sinner, he tried in a single afternoon to make amends for sixty years of twisted living.

Not that his crimes had stained his soul scarlet; they weren't that sort. They were the petty trespasses that paint a man's soul drab gray.

At first, when we found him amid the splintered lumber of his wrecked house, we assumed the tornado had killed him. That was a bad tornado. But localized, fortunately. Late, on that May afternoon it came galloping toward the village of Sioux Creek, its funnel dangling in the greenish-violet sky like a dragon's tail.

It scared me spitless. I was hurrying from my newspaper office to Ed Gerrish's house at the time. And you don't know how odd that was, my going to Ed Gerrish's. For ten years we had been enemies.

I thought that dragon tail, bobbing up and down, was going to lash our town into kindling wood. But those prairie twisters are freakish. All at once it swerved north, around the periphery of the village. Crossing the state road, it left telephone and power lines in a tangle; then dipped back into the northeast edge of town, delivering a mighty fillip to Ed Gerrish's house.

The house exploded. Then the sky-dragon jerked up its whirling tail and hopped northeast over the low prairie hills, mumbling mysteriously to itself as it climbed into the violent heavens.

Ed Gerrish was the only person killed that afternoon. Naturally, when we found him in the debris, we concluded that the tornado had murdered him. And that was strange, because he had always feared tornadoes. In his backyard he had built a cyclone cave that would have sheltered him from any tornado bombs. Why hadn't he holed in there?

Then, after we extricated him from the jagged chunks of plaster and broken laths, we saw the red gashes over his heart. But we didn't find the knife that had stabbed him; not then. Late that

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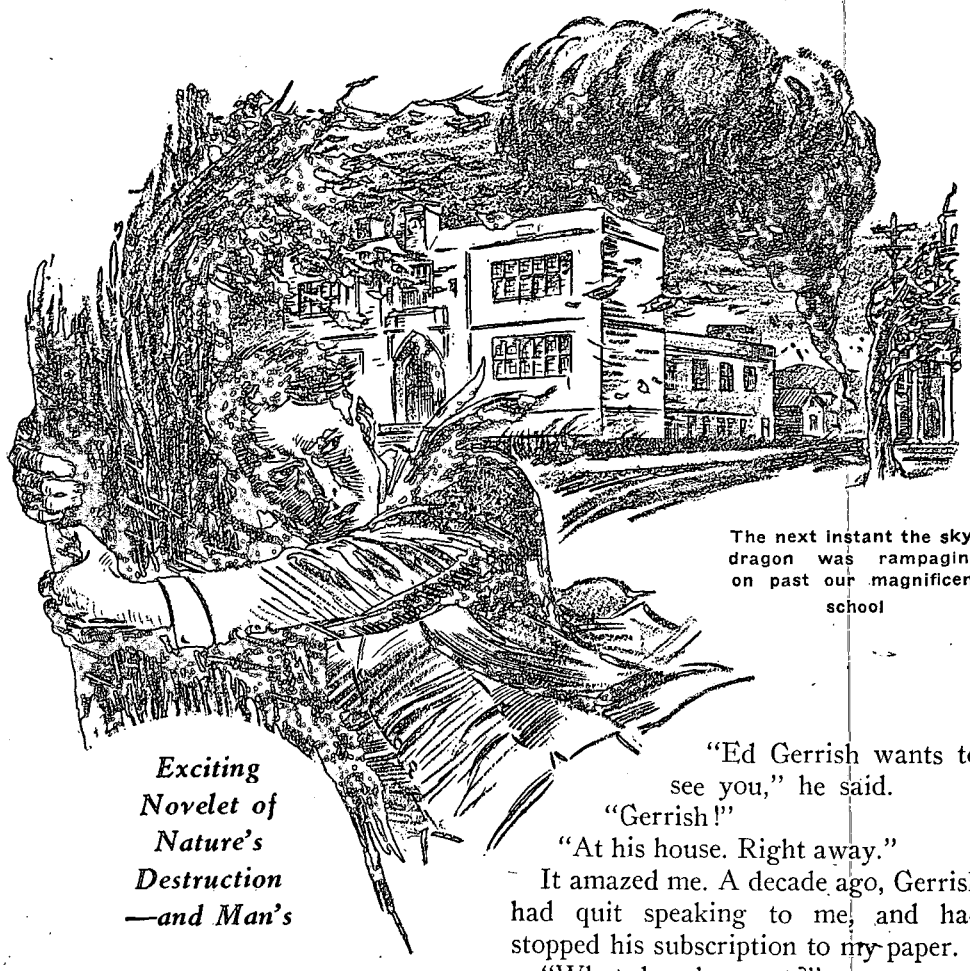

The next instant the sky-dragon was rampaging on past our magnificent school

Exciting Novelet of Nature's Destruction —and Man's

night—and a mad night it was, with no electricity—we found it. And we caught his murderer, too. But it took some doing.

IT HAD been a fine, sunny day, but at midafternoon the Sioux Creek *Herald* office grew dusky. I snapped on the lights, then poked my head out the door for a look at the heavens. A lot of dark oily clouds were boiling from the northwest, but I didn't think they held the threat of anything but hard rain. I returned to my typewrier.

A 4:20 Pat O'Connor's boy, Denny, opened the front door.

"Ed Gerrish wants to see you," he said.

"Gerrish!"

"At his house. Right away."

It amazed me. A decade ago, Gerrish had quit speaking to me, and had stopped his subscription to my paper.

"What does he want?"

"Dunno, Mr. Lewis. But he said it was awfully important, and for you to be sure to come right away."

My impulse was to snap: "You tell that old tightwad he can talk to me in my office." But the O'Connor kid added:

"He gave me a dollar for going after you and the other men."

"A—what?"

"A dollar. Honest."

It floored me. Ed Gerrish was so stingy that he didn't even have a telephone, and any time he'd give a kid a dollar to summon me, he must have world-shaking news.

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"Who else did he send for?"

"You, and Larry Cunningham, and Adolph Pier."

That did enflame my curiosity. For Gerrish hated them with all his shriveled soul. Larry Cunningham, a chap of my age—thirty-five—was suing him for a bill the old skinflint had run up at the Cunningham Lumber Company. And between Gerrish and Adolph Pier, the town marshal, bad blood had festered for years.

Denny O'Connor rustled out a dollar bill.

"See?" he said proudly.

The bill looked odd, and for a second I thought Gerrish had palmed off stage money on the poor kid. Then when I realized why it looked strange, I nearly collapsed.

Remember back in the summer of 1929, how the government decreased the size of our currency? Paper money used to be about a third larger. So help me, Ed Gerrish had paid Denny one of those old-fashioned dollars.

It would be negotiable, of course, but imagine! Gerrish hadn't got around to spending money his greedy fingers had raked in ten years ago. Maybe, I thought, the town's suspicions that he was a miser, with money buried on his premises, weren't far wrong.

"Have you seen Adolph Pier this afternoon?" Denny asked.

I hadn't.

"I can't find him. I went to the lumber yard and told Larry Cunningham, and he started for Gerrish's right away. But nobody knows where Pier is."

OUTSIDE, farmers were jumping into their cars and racing homeward before the storm broke, and pedestrians had nearly deserted the street. Close to earth the air hung sultry and windless, but overhead sinister-looking clouds scudded along fast, as if they were fleeing something evil.

I estimated that I could beat the rain to Ed Gerrish's, and at double-quick time I went swinging into the residential section.

As I covered the blocks, the clouds billowed blacker, like heavy smoke from a petroleum-refinery fire, and a deep unreal twilight shrouded everything. And still no wind, or rain. Continuous thunder floated through the oppressive air, as if up in the sky bearded giants were bowling with rocks.

Our village clings to the south slope of a long hill, and crowning this with a magnificent view of the rolling country, stands the Sioux Creek Consolidated School. We built it in 1929 for $123,000; a splendid school, three times as expensive as we needed or could afford. You'd think it was a Tudor castle instead of a school; and when I saw it I experienced again my old rage at Gerrish and Homer Chase and Larry Cunningham's father, Charles.

To erect that palatial school, those three men had outvoted the other two members of the school board. A special bond-issuing election was held; and you know how lavish the voters are when it comes to public spending.

Gerrish, Cunningham and Chase agitated for the bond issue. All during the campaign I attacked them in my paper, branding them knaves, fools, donkeys and a few worse things. They didn't like it. Ever since, Gerrish had despised me; Charles Cunningham, till his death in 1935, refused to advertise his lumber yard in the *Herald;* and Homer Chase gave me only a frosty nod when we passed.

Sight of the school opened all the angry old battle wounds. I halted, asking myself why I was trotting in obedience to Gerrish's summons.

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Then I saw the tornado, and it scared my anger away.

It was hopping on one black leg from a lemon-yellow patch of southwest sky. Not a leaf stirred on that windless hilltop, but the heavens were a-roar with a sound like a freight train on a trestle.

I wanted to run—but where? When that pulsating funnel came lashing through town, one spot would be as dangerous as another. I decided to hold my ground and fling myself flat if it jumped my way.

A wind licked up the schoolyard dust; the roaring increased. Twenty freight trains, twenty trestles. The wind turned into a gale, but it wasn't the wind that would damage us. It was the terrible vacuum at the core of that funnel. Any house that the funnel might hit would explode.

Then—a miracle.

WEST of town a brook-watered draw wanders north and south. When the bobbing funnel reached that draw it changed direction, staggering north like a man blind-drunk following the least resistance.

North and still north it rampaged, then swung east. After kicking hell out of the Interstate Power Company's highline, it reeled southeast, an irresponsible roisterer. It dipped into the northeast corner of town.

And it hit something, then. I couldn't see what, but I heard it. All those freight trains crashing through all those trestles. Then it roared away into open country.

I raced from the schoolyard toward East Sioux Creek. Dust and flying scraps of paper fogged the streets, and trees were heaving, but no rain had fallen. And so typically freakish was the storm that no rain at all doused our town that afternoon, although to the northeast, just beyond the town limits, they had a near-cloudburst.

Gerrish's house stood at the north end of a shallow valley separating the old town from what we called the new addition in East Sioux Creek. South of the house his pasture stretched to Adams Street, and south of that lay our fine town park.

This park snagged my attention as I plunged down the Adams Street hill. The tornado hadn't dipped far enough south to uproot its half-grown elms, but the terrific wind currents at the tornado's edge had flattened a big tent pitched there.

Not circus canvas, but the revival tent of the Reverend Alan Tilton, who called him the Ex-convict Evangelist. For several evenings he had been preaching there to swelling crowds. But he wouldn't preach tonight, for the tent was slashed, the lumber benches broken.

Then I looked up the valley and forgot all about the evangelist.

Ever since I could remember, Gerrish's house had stood at the head of the valley among dark pines; when I was a kid it seemed to scowl at us if we ventured into his pasture to fly kites. It would never scowl again. A heap of debris among uprooted pines—

I snapped open the pasture gate and ran along a cow path toward the wreckage. The clouds were breaking up, and in the lightening afternoon I glimpsed the blond head of a young man who stood gazing into the ruins. It was Larry Cunningham.

"Hello, Bill," he called. "Well, it got him. He's dead in there."

II

AMONG the plaster chunks and splintered boards you could see him, lying on what had been the kitchen floor.

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He was a long-bodied man with a bald head, and you could see that naked pate gleaming through the debris.

"Maybe he's still alive," I said. "Let's get him out."

Wading into the wreckage after me, Larry said:

"He couldn't be alive, Bill. I was coming through the pasture and saw it. The house seemed to explode. I threw myself flat on the ground."

"Why didn't he use his cave? That's what he dug it for."

Larry couldn't imagine.

And while we dug a path into the storm's leavings, I thought of how lean and fidgety Ed Gerrish had always been, a man who gave the impression that he would jump out of his shoes and run if you sneaked up behind him and said, "Boo!"

Before we reached his body other townspeople began arriving—old Mrs. Kritchlow, Sam Dysart, Joe Emery. Mrs. Kritchlow, who lived a half-block away, leaned on her cane and fixed her weak blue eyes on Larry Cunningham.

"Why didn't he leave the house with you and go to the cave?" she asked.

"Leave with me?"

Lifting her cane, she pointed east toward the back porch of her little house.

"Just before the storm hit," she said, "I was out shooing in my chicks. Saw you leave Ed's kitchen an' run to the cave. Why did Ed stay inside his house?"

Larry looked blank.

"Must have been somebody else you saw," he said. "I wasn't in the house at all."

Looking puzzled, Mrs. Kritchlow moved her lips soundlessly, and as more people arrived she whispered to them and pointed her cane at Larry.

We had almost reached Ed's body when Mayor Homer Chase came striding over the hill-crest from the northeast. His big frame was clad in overalls, and a hoe slanted over his shoulder.

"Great God," he boomed, "what happened?"

"Tornado, that's what," Mrs. Kritchlow shrilled. "Hit Ed Gerrish's house an' killed him dead. Didn't you hear it?"

"I was working in my garden patch," Homer bellowed, in that voice which always sang a bass solo of *Rocked In the Cradle of the Deep* at funerals. "I heard an awful racket, and then the wind howled like sixty, right over me. Threw myself flat."

Then a sudden look of concern crossed his big features.

"Did it tear up any other houses?"

He seemed mightly relieved when we told him that Ed Gerrish's house was the tornado's sole target. At sixty-five, Homer was as much of a tightwad as Ed had been. A retired real-estate man, he owned a dozen rental properties in town, and the chances were that his Scotch inclinations hadn't permitted him to carry tornado insurance.

"Funny," he said. "Out at my garden patch the wind was awful, but it wasn't no tornado. Funny it'd just hit Ed's house."

"Funnier than that," snapped Mrs. Kritchlow, "is why Ed didn't go to his cave with Larry Cunningham."

"Larry?"

"Saw him leave the kitchen. Positive it was him."

JUST before we lifted Ed's body clear of the debris Town Marshal Adolph Pier arrived. A stocky, coarse-faced man, he strode among the villagers, his alcoholic breath preceding him. At his heels was Denny O'Connor.

Focusing his gray eyes on the corpse in the wrecked house, Pier said:

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"Uh. The O'Connor kid says Ed sent for me and Larry Cunningham and Bill Lewis. What'd he want?"

For a second, nobody replied. Then Mrs. Kritchlow cried, "Hear that? He sent for Larry Cunningham. Knew I wasn't mistook."

And for Pier's benefit she told of seeing Larry ducking to the cave from Gerrish's kitchen.

Larry Cunningham had a temper, and it reddened his face.

"Now once and for all," he said in a clear, angry voice, "get this. I wasn't in Gerrish's kitchen, and I didn't go to his cave. I was on my way here, and the storm struck while I was still in the pasture."

"Guess I know you when I see you," Mrs. Kritchlow yapped. If there had been any doubt in her mind about the identity of the person she had seen, Larry's opposition had erased it.

Larry said, "Your eyes have been bad for years. Maybe you saw a man, but it wasn't me."

"Ain't you ashamed," Pier barked, "losing your temper with an old lady!"

"Old lady or not, I want to keep the record straight."

I couldn't see that it made much difference one way or the other. Then we pulled Ed Gerrish into the clear and stretched him out on the grass. Falling plaster and boards had broken one of his arms and legs, and had bruised him about the head. But we weren't interested in those things.

What cried out for attention was the crimson blot that red-inked the left side of Gerrish's shirt.

Adolph Pier knelt beside the body, staring for what seemed a long time at that scarlet stain.

Then, rising, he said, "Ed wasn't killed by no tornado. He was stabbed. Murdered. Before that tornado ever come. No wonder he didn't go to his cave."

And weaving a little, he strode over to Larry Cunningham. Pier didn't often get the chance to arrest anybody, and he was self-importantly making the most of it.

"All right," he barked. "Come on."

"Come on? Where?"

"You're going down to jail."

"Listen, you drunken old—"

"Don't talk to me like that," Adolph Pier thundered. "You're under arrest for the murder of Ed Gerrish."

ADOLPH PIER was a good deal of a blockhead, and his attitude toward Larry Cunningham was irritating. Larry and I had been good pals since that seventh-grade picnic when the teacher licked us for putting crawdads into the marshmallows.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You can't arrest Larry."

The marshal wheeled and swung his beefy face close to mine. His little eyes were big-pupiled, and the stench of stale alcohol nearly gagged me.

"Who's stopping me? I'm the marshal, ain't I?"

"You don't have anything on Larry."

"He was here with Ed Gerrish, wasn't he? And he's got an ornery temper. Him and Ed probably got to arguing about that lumber bill—"

I said, "Ed Gerrish sent for three of us. For Larry, and you and me. Larry and I came right away, but the O'Connor kid couldn't find you. Where were you, anyway?"

Pier swore, said he had a good notion to run me in, too, and declared that his whereabouts were none of my affair.

I turned to Denny O'Connor.

"Tell us just what Ed Gerrish said to you, Denny."

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But before Denny could reply a voice from the throng bawled for him to shut up. It was his father, drunken old Pat O'Connor.

"My son ain't one to be interferin' with the proper course of law an' order, an' if you open your head, Denny O'Connor, I'll be tannin' your hide once we're home."

Denny swallowed, looked as if he wanted to speak, but didn't.

"If anyone's interfering with law and order it's you," I told Pat. "Let your kid talk. We've got to get to the bottom of this."

"He'll talk under pain of a sore hinder," Pat exclaimed, "an' you can't speak that way to me, Bill Lewis. You can't insult an Irishman an' get away with it."

"Nuts! I'm half Irish myself and you know it. Let the kid tell us—"

Saucer-eyed, Denny looked as if he wanted to speak, but his mouth was frozen shut.

"Git along home an' remain there," Pat ordered, and his son, with many a backward glance, obeyed. And Pat, who didn't want Adolph Pier arresting him for intoxication every time he took a nip, added: "If there's talkin' to be done my son will do it at the proper time an' place."

Pier grabbed Larry's elbow and gave him a shove.

"Come on," he barked. There's been enough horsing around."

Larry jerked his arm free, his blond neck and ears flushing. Pier lunged out but Larry sidestepped, and as the squat, liquor-logged marshal trundled past Larry kicked his pants. Swearing murderously, Pier bulled around, and Larry got his fists up. But before he could use them a half-dozen men grappled him.

Larry shouldn't have resisted, of course, but trigger-tempered as he was, his resistance was pardonable. I found it harder to pardon what Homer Chase did. Into the smother of men holding Larry he shouldered, and brought the wooden handle of his hoe sharply down on Larry's skull. It put the lad sound asleep, and they lugged him off to our rusty jail.

But after all, Homer Chase was mayor, and in a village like Sioux Creek the mayor is a peace officer.

"Send Doc Esbeck and Jim Radcliffe," he called after Adolph Pier. "I'll stay here with the remains. And you'd better telephone the county seat."

III

DURING the next half hour, everybody in town straggled over there to have a look at the corpse of Gerrish. It was the most excitement since Ottokar Shultz horse-whipped Felix Trotter.

Old Mrs. Kritchlow told everybody that she had witnessed Larry Cunningham leaving Gerrish's kitchen just before the storm struck, and people shook their heads and sighed that it was a shame Larry's temper had betrayed him into murdering Gerrish.

Old Doc Esbeck rode over in the hearse with Jim Radcliffe, our undertaker. Doc always has had two standard remedies—castor oil for appendicitis, and morphine for headaches; and he belched in his whiskers and declared Gerrish legally dead, pending the arrival of the coroner. So they loaded the body into the hearse and drove off toward Radcliffe's furniture and undertaking establishment.

"Lost something?" Homer Chase called to me.

I was knee-deep in the ruins of Gerrish's house, and when he joined me I said:

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"Seems the knife that stabbed Ed ought to be around somewhere."

Since my libel against the school board, Chase had been chilly toward me, but now he thumbed his lined, leatherly face and admitted it was a reasonable assumption.

But excavate all we pleased, the debris wouldn't yield that knife. The tornado had smashed the kitchen cabinet, scattering plenty of cutlery, but the blades were all shining clean, not bloody.

"I've heard of cyclones doing funny things," Chase said. "Heard of them picking up such things as knives and carrying them miles."

"Sure," I said. "Very common. About as common as quintuplets."

Meditatively, Chase pulled at his big nose.

"Just happened to think—we ain't looked in the cave. . . ."

I felt like a goop. The excitement had certainly scattered my wits. It occurred to me that if Mrs. Kritchlow's eyes, weak with age, had actually seen somebody dashing into that cave, he might be there yet. The possibility of such a thing seemed to hit Chase, too, for on our way to the cave he halted.

"Have you seen Reverend Tilton?" he asked.

The evangelist!

Very low, Chase rumbled, "Calls himself the 'Ex-convict Evangelist.' There's his tent—within running distance of this cave. He had Ed wrapped around his finger. Myself, I've never trusted ex-convicts, even if they turn preacher."

The mound of the cave bulged like a big grave about a rod from what had been the kitchen. Years before, Ed Gerrish had dug it, before his wife died and his two kids moved away to lead their own lives in California.

"I'll never die in a tornado," Ed used to say. "Not with that cave. . . ."

Homer Chase lifted the door and led the way down the stone steps. The door at the bottom was shut. Chase hesitated a second, then shoved it open. He struck a match, and I followed him inside.

Nobody was there. Only the dank, cool cave-odor greeted us; an odor enriched by years of apple barrels and hoarded potatoes and homemade wine. Shelves lined the walls, laden with jars and preserves, all dusty and cobwebbed. The match-flame licked Chase's big fingers; he dropped it and we emerged.

In the sky the clouds had broken away, and the late afternoon sun slanted over the naked wreckage of Gerrish's dwelling, where people still milled and listened to Mrs. Kritchlow. They'd have burned her as a witch, three hundred years ago, I thought.

I paced slowly south through the pasture, remembering March Saturdays when Larry Cunningham and I had sent kites into the windy heavens; and I wondered if ever jail bars had enclosed a better guy.

IN THE town park the evangelist's tent sprawled in a tangle of flaccid ropes and split canvas. My gaze left it for a group of boys who were giggling around one of the park's stone fireplaces. There were five or six kids, exuding an air of mischief, and I was chagrined to discover Billy, my eight-year-old-son, among them.

At that fireplace a man was on his knees praying, his face in his elbows. It was the Reverend Alan Tilton. He was so absorbed in his prayer that he seemed not to notice those cavorting boys. Those little heathens were dancing in close to him and squeezing the juice from maple squirters against the back of his neck.

I stopped that. I sent Billy home, instructing him to tell my wife to look

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for me when she saw me. And during all that commotion the evangelist remained on his knees. I sat down on a park bench and waited for him to stop praying.

He was about fifty, a sandy-haired man, his limber body clad today in an old fashioned suit of black summer silk. He wore white canvas oxfords, a hole in one sole. Kneeling there, the intensity of his attitude reminded me of some Old Testament prophet, praying on a mountain.

A few days before he had come to town and pitched his tent, preaching every night to increasing crowds. Our regular ministers would have no dealings with him; he was a free-lance, connected with no church, and they doubted his sincerity; but I had attended a couple of nights before, and he seemed sincere enough.

What had astonished me was the sight of Ed Gerrish entering the tent. Within my memory no church door had received that lean, nervous man. Possibly the hymns about the old-time religion had drifted up the valley to his porch and filled him with spiritual nostalgia. He paused beneath the tent-eaves, removed his hat, and ventured along the grassy aisle as if he were walking on eggs.

The evangelist preached a fiery sermon that night. He was a compelling speaker. With glowing eyes he urged all sinners to come forward and be saved. He said that once he had been a sinner himself, having forged a check as a young man. He had endured several years behind prison walls; an unpleasant experience; but not as unpleasant as all eternity amid the brimstone geysers of Hell.

I stole several curious glances at Ed Gerrish during the sermon. At first he seemed self-conscious, his bony shanks resting gingerly on the hard lumber bench, his mouth looking as if he had been sipping lemon juice; but gradually the sermon absorbed all his attention.

The evangelist had a graphic way of picturing the flaming pits of Hell, and then he soothed your blistered imagination with a cool description of the golden avenues of paradise.

A half-dozen persons went forward that night, Ed Gerrish among them. He had been sitting nervously tapping his knee, his slitted mouth working, as if he were fighting a battle with himself. Then something gave way; quick tears blinded him; he jumped up and hurried to join the converts. I wondered what old sins had been gnawing his conscience.

Next day everybody talked about how he had got religion. He had it bad, they said. He kept going to the tent even when services weren't in progress, to discuss theology with the evangelist, and he had invited him home to dinner.

AND now at last the Reverend Mr. Tilton concluded his prayer and arose, a kind of blank look in his eyes, as if he had been seeing visions. I told him my name and asked him if he had heard about Gerrish's death.

He nodded; Brother Gerrish, he said, had gone to God.

"And with a clean soul. He was a sinner like the best of us, but at the end of his life he was bathed in the Blood of the Lamb."

He stood gazing at the wrecked tent, and then, with a tired sigh, sank to the park bench.

"It can be salvaged," he murmured. "The things of this world are nothing. They'll all crumble, like the walls of Jericho."

I said, "Ed Gerrish was murdered. Did you know that?"

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He nodded; some people had told him as much, on their way back to town from Gerrish's house.

"I was praying for the murderer's soul," he said. "Praying that whoever he may be he'll come to me for salvation."

"You saw a good deal of Gerrish the last day or two, didn't you?"

"Yes. He was a frightened man, Brother Lewis."

"Frightened?"

"When he realized how deep he had lived in sin. But he was making amends."

"When did you last see him?"

"This afternoon. About three. He had come to a decision. I had wrestled with his spirit for nearly two days, and at last he decided to cast aside the last barrier between himself and the Kingdom."

"What do you mean?"

The evangelist said, "He was going to send for you—you and Larry Cunningham and Adolph Pier. Did he?"

"Yes. But he was dead when we got there. What did he want with us?"

"It doesn't matter now. He had made his peace with God. I advised him to make his peace with men. To confess the sin that troubled him."

The evangelist shook his head. "He has passed on, now, with a clear conscience. No good can come from prattling about his trespasses."

And for all my urging, he wouldn't drop another hint as to what Gerrish was going to tell us.

Remembering what Homer Chase had said about ex-convicts, I asked:

"Where were you when the tornado came?"

I COULD observe his face in profile. For a moment the implication of my query didn't seem to hit him, and then suddenly I saw his mouth tighten and he snapped round his face, tiny points of fire in his eyes. And his words startled me, they were so much more worldly than any he had used.

"What's the idea? You can't pin a thing on me," he snarled.

"Nobody's trying to. I just asked you a question."

His gaze swerved, and he stared up the valley toward Gerrish's.

"I wasn't up there, if that's what you want to know. I was . . . strolling. Meditating. In the woods south of town."

"Alone?"

"One doesn't take the whole town along when it's meditation one wants. Alone, yes. Except for God." A kind of gray shadow stole over his countenance. He wet his lips. And he said, "You're thinking of my prison record, aren't you?"

"Not especially. I'm just exploring all the angles."

"You needn't . . . explore that angle any more. I'm fifty-two years old. It's been nearly thirty years since I was a felon. I found God behind the bars. . . . The uses of this world are dross, Brother Lewis. Dross . . . frivolity. Money," he added slowly, "means nothing to me. Nothing."

"Money?"

"Money—yes. It might interest you to know that Brother Gerrish had five thousand dollars in his kitchen when I left there at three today."

I gasped. A little smile stole over his lips.

"You didn't find it in the wreckage?"

"Not a penny."

"Stolen, of course," he said. "Robbery and murder. Bait for Hell, Brother Lewis. The Devil never sleeps. The money was to be mine. To carry on God's work. Mine—after Brother Gerrish's conference with you and Brother

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Cunningham and Brother Pier. . . . Well, it's gone now. The Devil's won another skirmish against the forces of Righteousness."

And he added, "But he can't win forever. The Day will come . . . the heavens rolling back like a scroll . . . soon now, perhaps. And this world and all its vanities will burn clean in a fire that leaves no ash. . . ."

His hands were clasped together; his hair was rumpled a little; and a kind of fierce exultation blazed in his eyes.

I stood up. I wanted to be alone to think.

He said, "You understand how little money means to me? Except in the cause of salvation?"

"Of course."

"I would have had the money anyway. Why should I have listened to the Devil?"

"You shouldn't."

"And didn't," he added.

I asked, "You saw the money?"

"Certainly. It had been buried for years under the pines. Currency. In a steel box. Five thousand dollars—or nearly that."

He extended his hand and we shook goodbye. There was steely strength in his long fingers; and I don't think he realized how hard he was wringing my hand. It was the handshake of a man keyed up beneath a calm exterior with throbbing excitement and perhaps with terror.

IV

AFTER coffee and sandwiches at the Square Deal Cafe, I went to the town hall. Loafers clustered about the entrance like drones at a hive, and inside Mayor Chase and Adolph Pier were arguing with Sam Reno, an attorney. He wanted them to release Larry Cunningham on his own recognizance, but they said nix.

So he'd have to drive over to Ashland Center, the county seat, and get a writ from the district judge, Reno grumbled.

After he had gone, I asked Homer Chase whether the sheriff and coroner had arrived.

"Nope. Telephone wires are down, and we couldn't get a call through," Pier said.

"Why didn't you send someone for them in a car?"

"No hurry. Them wires will be repaired pretty soon, and meanwhile Cunningham ain't going to get loose."

I asked to see Larry, but Adolph Pier vetoed that. He'd been at his bottle again, and his eyes stared owlishly.

"Let him talk to Larry, if he wants to," Homer Chase put in.

So Pier led me back along the stinking corridor, but before we reached the cell he shuffled to a halt and faced me belligerently.

"What's it to you?" he demanded, those big-pupiled eyes hating me. "How come you're nosing into it?"

"Larry didn't kill Gerrish. You know that."

"What do you mean—I know it?"

"Where were you, anyway, when the tornado came?"

In reply, thick profanity dribbled off his tongue; his fists lifted and wavered in vague circles; he offered to beat me up. A very stupid man, Adolph Pier. I brushed past him and came to Larry's cell.

Since there was no electricity, they had given him a stubby candle, and its pale light threw Larry's big shadow on the stained wall. He was sitting on the cot with his head in his hands.

"You dope," I said, "You're acting as if you had killed him."

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He looked up, smiled wanly. "Hello, Bill. This is a mess, isn't it?"

"We've been in messes before," I said, remembering that seventh-grade picnic. "Buck up, fella."

He fingered his skull. "Head aches," he said. "A dull, mean ache, ever since that scuffle. Somebody beaned me."

"That was Homer Chase. He cracked you with a hoe."

"I thought it was a sledge."

I grinned.

"We'll have you out of here after a while," I said. "Sam Reno's gone to Ashland Center, and I'm doing some investigating on my own."

"Nice of you," he muttered, through his headache.

"But there's just one point. I don't want to shag around half the night and then find out that you really killed him. That'd annoy me."

He stood up, grinned. "No, Bill. I didn't."

"Not in a pig's eye?"

When we were kids, to say that was the equivalent of taking a blood-oath that you were telling the truth.

"Not in a pig's eye, Bill. It was just like I said. The storm struck as I was going through Gerrish's pasture."

"Okay. Now do you have any idea who did do it?"

"I really don't, Bill. Unless it was old lady Kritchlow—she seemed plenty anxious to get me involved. But it wouldn't be her, of course. No, I can't even figure why Gerrish sent for you and me and Pier. Of course, he might have wanted to settle with me on that lumber bill, but he wouldn't have needed you and Pier there for that."

"Here's something," I said. "I talked with that preacher and he said Ed Gerrish had money at his house this afternoon. Nearly five thousand dollars. In a tin box."

AND suddenly a change came over Larry Cunningham—a change that I sensed rather than observed. "Money?" I thought he tried to pronounce the word casually, but his tone was strained.

"In currency. The preacher said Ed was going to confess some old sin, and then give the money to him."

Larry sat down, his gaze avoiding mine, and for a minute he rubbed his head.

"What happened to it?" he asked finally.

"I suppose the murderer stole it. We didn't see a cent in the wreckage of that kitchen."

He rubbed his head some more. I'd never seen him act like that before—so dazed and listless and yet deeply troubled. It was almost as if he actually had killed Gerrish, and his conscience were paining him.

Suddenly he stood up and came to the bars, gripping them, his face blanched.

"Listen, Bill. Why don't you stay out of it?"

"Out?"

"Why don't you go home and get a good night's sleep?"

"You're crazy."

"Will you do that for me, Bill? Keep clear out of it?"

"No."

His knuckles whitened; he seemed about to say something else; then, instead, he turned back to the cot.

"I wish I'd never gone to his house," he blurted out.

"You damned idiot," I said. "You're acting as if you killed him."

"Am I?"

"You know you are! Did you?"

His eyes met mine steadily.

"I said I didn't—and I wouldn't lie to you, Bill. I might lie to the others, but I wouldn't lie to you."

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"Then what's all this nonsense about me keeping out of it?"

"It isn't nonsense. I just wish you would, that's all. They won't convict me. They won't have a case. I wouldn't have had time to kill him. All they'll have is circumstantial evidence."

"They'll get Mrs. Kritchlow on the stand. She'll swear she saw you leave Ed's kitchen. And you never know what a jury will do."

He didn't reply; just sat there looking downcast.

I said, "You act like you're trying to shield someone. Are you?"

"I'm tired of answering questions. Just go home, Bill. Go home and get a good night's sleep."

"You give me a pain," I said. "They're trying to railroad you and there you sit, telling me to sleep."

"Who's trying?"

"Pier and Chase. Or that's what it amounts to. They nabbed you and decided you're guilty. And they've used the telephone wires being down as an excuse not to get the sheriff and coroner."

"I'm in no hurry to see the sheriff," Larry said.

WHEN I returned to the front room, I found a newcomer in the lantern light with Pier and Chase—Denny O'Connor's father, Pat. His baggy pant-legs were planted wide apart, as if the Town Hall were a heaving ship.

"Have a nice visit?" Pier asked.

"Wonderful. And before I came down here I had a visit with somebody else."

They were all looking at me, sharply.

"With the Reverend Mr. Tilton. He said Ed had a box-full of money at his house this afternoon. Nearly five thousand dollars."

Mention of that money affected them nearly as strangely as it had Larry.

"Five thousand dollars?" O'Connor articulated, thickly. "A man'd never have to work again, with that much—"

"Maybe the preacher did it," Homer Chase ventured. "Maybe we're off on the wrong foot, holding Larry."

"I don't think he did it," I said. "But I think he knows who did."

Adolph Pier's chunky face was in shadow, but I fancied it darkened with blood.

"Nosey," he muttered. "Always have to nose in, don't you."

Homer Chase stood up. "Maybe," he said, "we ought to be getting the sheriff and coroner."

"You should have got them a long time ago."

"Telephone lines down—you know how it's been. But maybe I ought to drive over to Ashland Center after them. Yep, think that's what I'll do."

A sharp sound rattled from the floor. It was Pat O'Connor's pipe. Filling it, his fingers had turned buttery.

Adolph Pier stooped and rescued it. "You're drunk, Pat," he said.

"Huh?"

"I say you're drunk. You're liquored up."

"Ain't the first time."

"You'd better get on home an' sleep it off."

Pat tried lighting his pipe, but his marksmanship was so faulty that the flaming match kept missing the bowl.

"Hell," he grunted. "I'll smoke 'er dry." And he added, "Maybe you're right. Kind of sleepy. . . ."

He weaved over to the door, then halted, gazed back.

"I didn't do it. You understand that, don't you?"

Nobody replied.

"Everybody's always been against

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me," he added. "But I liked Ed Gerrish. Fine man. Fine generous man. We been friends and neighbors . . . for years."

Then he reeled to the street.

Homer Chase and I followed, Homer to get into his car to go for the sheriff, and I returned to my office. It was quite dark, now, a moonless night. Without street lamps, the town was pitch black, except for an occasional candle burning in some store. The air was thickly humid—oppressive, even sinister.

V

IN MY black office I found a flashlight and sat for a long time with its rays slanting ghoulishly up from my desk. Over and over I asked myself why Larry Cunningham had gone queer when I mentioned Gerrish's money. He acted precisely as if he wanted to shield someone, but whom?

I couldn't imagine. Nor could I, actually, imagine who had entered Gerrish's house that afternoon and slain him. Had it been a casual visitor, some neighbor dropping in to pass the time of day? Someone like old lady Kritchlow or drunken Pat O'Connor or even Homer Chase? Somebody lured into murder by the sight of five thousand dollars?

But I couldn't picture Gerrish allowing himself to be stabbed by feeble old Mrs. Kritchlow or fumbling Pat O'Connor; and while Homer Chase was a strapping man, and devoted to money, yet he was entirely too astute to risk his neck for that amount. He was probably worth sixty thousand dollars.

I didn't like to link murder with a minister of the gospel, even such a flamboyant minister as the Reverend Mr. Tilton; so that left Adolph Pier. Where had he been when the storm hit town? And why had he been so eager to arrest Larry? And why, indeed, was Larry acting like such a fool? Whom was he shielding?

Then I remembered the evangelist saying that Ed Gerrish had been frightened, and that was puzzling—nearly as puzzling as why he had sent for me. Recalling the reason for our feud—those bitter editorials I had printed ten years ago—I went to our files and dragged out those issues of 1929.

I had been pretty mad, fighting against the school-bond issue; and my language was most intemperate. Well, I had been correct; that schoolhouse was too expensive for us. And suddenly as I blew the dust from those old papers and read the yellowed pages I caught my breath and a deep excitement began throbbing in my blood. Everything wasn't clear to me yet, but it was beginning to be.

Automatically I reached for the telephone to call H. Malloy Ferguson, our banker, but the silence of storm-dead wires came from the receiver. I stood up. I'd go to his home.

Then I heard something. My nerves jerked; I thumbed off the flashlight and reached into my desk drawer and curled my fingers round my thirty-eight.

The sound rattled from the black recesses of the office; somebody was fooling with the knob of the back door. I glided back there and peered through the glass, but only inky air poured into my eye-sockets. The knob rattled again; a voice said, "Mr. Lewis. . . ."

A young voice. Denny O'Connor's. I snapped on the flashlight and unlocked the door.

He looked small and furtive and scared, stepping quickly over the threshold.

"I'll get a licking," he said, "if my Dad finds out. He locked me in my

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room, but I went out the window and down the drain-pipe."

"Good boy."

"I sneaked down here through alleys. To answer them questions you wanted to ask me at Gerrish's."

"Come along," I said. "I've got to go to Ferguson's, and we can talk on the way."

OUT on the street I didn't use the flashlight, for Denny was terrified lest someone recognize him and report to his father. And while we groped through the thick shadows Denny told me how on his way from school that afternoon he had seen a gopher in Gerrish's pasture, chased it into its hole.

Poking a stick into the earth after it, he had been startled by Ed Gerrish calling his name. He snatched up his books to flee, for always Gerrish chased kids from that pasture, but today was different.

"Wait!" the man called, from beneath the pines. "Do you want to earn a dollar?"

Dubiously, Denny approached the thin, nervous man. Only today he seemed thinner and more nervous than usual—a jumpy skeleton. Sweat dewed his bald pate; his cheeks were flushed, his eyes excited and restless.

"Come in, come in," he said, and Denny followed his meager shanks to the kitchen.

The boy's eyes popped when he saw the kitchen table. For upon it was spread a gunnysack, nearly rotted to shreds and exuding a strong mouldy odor; and upon the sack sat a steel box. Gerrish swung up the lid, and Denny gaped at more money than he had ever seen.

Currency. Thick rolls of it. And the bills seemed to be all in small denominations.

Gerrish's bony fingers touched them, caressingly at first; and then a shudder wracked him and he jerked his hand away as if a spider had stung him.

"Boy," he shrilled, "do you know what that is?"

"It's money."

Gerrish laughed, loud and like a man crazed.

"It's paper," he screeched, wagging a forefinger under Denny's scared nose. "Paper with little bits of silk thread in it. It's worry, boy, that's what it is. It's nights when you can't sleep for thinkin' how you got it, and days when you go to the flower bed where it's buried for fear that thieves have been there.

"Well, it's worthless," he shrilled, as if Denny had disputed him. "Oh, it'll buy the fine feathers of this world, but it won't fool Saint Peter, and it won't blot out the sins inked against you on the ledger of eternity."

Just like a preacher he talked, Denny said; only he was more wrought up than a preacher. And then he dropped to a chair and clutched his hands together on the table and buried his face in his arms. Denny thought: "He's gone crazy. I'd better beat it—"

Then Gerrish lifted his head, and he was calm suddenly; only his eye-rims glistened. In a voice pitched low he said:

"But I've found God now, boy. It's never too late to go to God, if your spirit is humble. If your conscience is clean." And a note of defiance entered his voice.

"Well I'm cleaning mine. Nobody can stop me. I want you to go after three men for me. Larry Cunningham, and Bill Lewis, and Adolph Pier. . . . And take a dollar, boy. I'd give you more, only the money's not mine any more. It's God's. Go ahead—help yourself."

Into that box of currency Denny dipped a hand. The bills didn't crackle

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under his touch; they lay in soggy, dank rolls. He peeled off a cold dollar and edged toward the door.

Then he heard it. Then he knew that he hadn't been alone with Gerrish.

It came from beyond a door leading to the dining room. A sneeze. Or the beginning of one. It was instantly smothered, and the sneeze that followed was so repressed that Denny scarcely heard it. Anyhow, by that time Denny had reached the porch, and he started running, glad to get away with a whole hide.

"It was that evangelist who sneezed," Denny told me.

"How do you know?"

"Because just as I left the house I saw his hat. On the porch swing. He always wears a derby hat. Nobody else around here wears one."

AS I remembered it, the Reverend Mr. Tilton was bare-headed when I found him praying in the park; but I couldn't recall whether he had carried a hat in his hand. He had told me that he left Gerrish's house about three to go for a stroll; and it must have been a a little after four when Denny saw the derby.

"Did you tell anyone about the money you saw?" I asked.

Trudging by my side, Denny hesitated an instant before replying. Then he admtted that he had told his father.

The O'Connors lived in East Sioux Creek, a block from Gerrish, and Denny hurried home to leave his books; his father had ordered him not to loiter on the way from school. Mrs. O'Connor was gone, out winning the family bread by housecleaning, but the boy found old Pat dozing in the sun amid the chickens and the flies.

His bleary eyes fluttered open; and without mentioning the dollar, for fear his dad would snatch it and get roaringly stewed, Denny told him that Ed Gerrish had asked him to run an errand.

Pat puffed out his cheeks, and Denny could tell that he was about to orate that the O'Connors were as good as anybody, and no son of his had to run errands for Gerrish. So to prevent that, Denny told about the steel box of money.

That produced a tirade from Pat. It was the oft-heard story about how diligently he had worked and how mischievously life had checkmated him; and while he was in the midst of his speech Denny sneaked away and ran down to Cunningham's Lumber Yard.

"I heard Ed had got religion," Larry said. "I'll bet his conscience is hurting and he wants to pay me his honest debt."

And Larry struck out for Gerrish's. Denny spent a few minutes inquiring along Main Street for Adolph Pier, without success, and then he came to the *Herald* office.

By that time, the sky was wicked with clouds, and Denny concluded he'd better hike for home. He chose a roundabout way, still hoping to encounter Adolph Pier. He went to Trade Street, our tenderloin, and trudged past the pool halls and beer shacks, but no Pier did he see. The wind rose to a frightful screech; over his shoulder Denny glimpsed the tornado's funnel; he ran.

"It was sure a big wind," he concluded. "I've never seen such a wind."

And he lapsed into silence.

"Go on," I said. "Tell the rest."

"The rest?"

"You haven't finished. What did you do during the storm? And where did you find Pier? You were with him when he came to Gerrish's."

"I didn't do nothing during the storm. Except kind of walk along the street."

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"You're not telling me everything, Denny."

"Sure. Sure I am."

We had reached the big home of H. Malloy Ferguson, the banker, and we paused by the snowball bushes rimming his lawn.

"Listen, Denny. We're dealing with murder. You've got to tell me what you know about it."

"I've told you."

"Where did you find Adolph Pier?"

"I found him—just—just in the park. The town park. That's where."

"Why are you lying?"

"Mr. Lewis," he cried out, "don't keep nagging me with questions. I've told you everything—everything—that I can tell."

I gave up. For the moment, at least. "All right, Denny—have it your own way," I said, and he followed me to the Ferguson porch.

Carrying a candle, the banker himself answered my knock. Too much activity stretched ahead for me to accept his invitation to come in; I asked him several questions, there on his porch. When it comes to figures, old H. Malloy Ferguson is as exact as an adding machine; and his memory has the tenacious clarity of etched metal.

Denny and I departed for the town park and the house where Ed Gerrish was slain.

VI

THE valley between West and East Sioux Creek might have been a lake of black water, so brimming with darkness was it. We stumbled along through the dewy grass, and when we reached the evangelist's tent, I switched on the flashlight. The canvas still lay plastered against the ground, except for a little hummock at one end.

I called the evangelist's name, but the only response was the chorus from a village of frogs in a nearby swamp.

That hummock was really a tiny shelter tent constructed from a portion of the big top. I lifted a canvas flap and peered inside. A cot stood there, neatly made up, and a Bible lay on the pillow, but the Reverend Mr. Tilton was absent.

"Maybe he's left town," Denny murmured. "Maybe he killed Ed Gerrish and got scared and ran away."

It was possible.

"He used to be a convict," Denny added. "He said so himself. An ex-convict might kill a man for his money."

"He might."

"You don't think Larry Cunningham did it, do you?"

"No."

But as we trudged into Gerrish's pasture, I did some wondering. Denny had said that Larry left his lumber yard as soon as he learned that Gerrish wanted him. He would have had plenty of time to reach the house before the tornado, and with five minutes to spare.

We slipped through the frontyard gate, the flashlight guiding us among the wreckage to the house. Through what had been the kitchen I waded to the debris-choked dining room. Denny had heard somebody sneeze in there.

I poked through the chaos, discovering nothing consequential, and then, in the plaster dust, something gleamed. Something tiny and yellow. I pocketed it and searched further, but I found nothing more.

We left, following the route Mrs. Kritchlow said Larry had taken to the cave, but instead of pausing there we ascended the hill. Gerrish's windbreak confronted us, a row of pines growing out of tangled bushes. Some had been uprooted. We crawled through to a field.

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It was a cornfield, the tender shoots just venturing through finely-worked soil. Eastward along the field-edge we prowled, down a hill, up another. Due north of the O'Connor dwelling a fence obstructed us. We climbed over, proceeding east, and suddenly the soil became blacker. It was mud. The rain which missed the village had started falling here.

In broad zig-zags through that second cornfield we cut northeast, and my flashlight picked out something in the thickening mud. Foot tracks, the toes pointing southwest toward town.

On we went, sliding and slipping in the mire, and then suddenly I spied something which brought me up short. It was a second line of foot tracks, but these led away from town; and there was something most peculiar about them. It was the abruptness with which they began. The man who made them might have been dropped from the sky by the tornado, or he might have been walking backward. For they appeared suddenly in an area of mud as smooth as black glass.

THEN all at once the whole thing snapped clear in my brain, and I thought I knew the answer. I touched my thirty-eight, pivoted, retraced my steps; and when we emerged through the windbreak I spoke to Denny.

"I want you to run an errand. Go down to the town hall. If the sheriff and coroner are there with Chase and Pier, tell them that Bill Lewis knows who killed Gerrish."

"Do you really know?" Denny exclaimed.

"Yes. And if the sheriff isn't there yet, tell anybody you see. Those loafers —anybody. Tell them I know where the knife that stabbed Gerrish is, and where the money is hidden. Got it?"

He nodded.

"And here's something else. As soon as you've got that story spread around a bit, run back here fast. I'll meet you here by the cave."

I flicked the light toward the cave-mound. And I said, "Hold on."

If you're country-bred you know how caves are built—a round ventilating tile rising through the earth from the interior. Gerrish's was no exception. But exceptional indeed was what I saw across the top of that tile. It hadn't been there this afternoon, I was sure.

It was a two-by-four from the wrecked house. And wrapped around it many times was a rope. It looked like an auto towing rope, and the steel hook on the end helped secure it to the two-by-four. The other end descended taut through the tile into the cave.

I caught my breath; my heart pounded. I yanked up the closed cave door, dived down the steps, banged open the door at the bottom.

In the cave, twisting languidly at the end of that rope, a corpse was hanging. A chair from Gerrish's house lay overturned beyond reach of the dangling feet.

It was the Reverend Alan Tilton. His forehead-veins stood out as big as lead pencils, and his mouth gaped wide.

And from the floor I snatched a sheet of paper. The message wavered over the page in a thin, frightened script. It said:

May God forgive me everything. This afternoon I killed Ed Gerrish. The Devil tempted me and I succumbed. He had money and I took it, but now I cannot bear to touch it. I have buried it where the Devil can never again use it to tempt the weak. I throw myself upon the tender mercy of God.

Alan Tilton.

I read the confession aloud. Denny listened saucer-eyed, and when I finished he gulped:

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"So Larry didn't do it."

"No."

"It seems funny . . . a preacher . . . killing. . . ."

"Too funny."

He stared at me.

"Go on down to the town hall," I said. "Don't mention a word of this. Just tell them what I told you to."

He hurried off through the black night. I closed the outer cave door, stole over to the heaped shadows of the windbreak, and settled to wait.

VII

NOT more than ten minutes after he left Denny returned, panting. "I told them," he said. "Pier and some of those loafers. The sheriff hadn't come yet."

"What did they say?"

"Pier said he wished you'd keep your nose out of it. What do we do now?"

"The hardest thing of all," I said. "We wait." We settled in the thick shadows of the windbreak, and I added, "There was a wise old guy once, Denny. He thought that every man carried the seeds of his own destruction in himself. His name was Shakespeare. We're waiting for fear to hatch out those seeds in the man who killed Ed Gerrish."

"What if it don't work out that way?"

"That'll make me a sap. Now suppose you tell me where you found Adolph Pier this afternoon."

Silence.

"Come on, spill it."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Pier told me if I ever breathed a word of it he'd arrest Dad every time he took a drink. That would keep Dad in jail all the time."

"You know you can trust me."

I heard Denny swallowing, and suddenly he blurted out:

"All right. I told you the truth about everything, except that I didn't find Pier in the park. When the storm came I was on Trade Street, and I wanted to get home fast. I took a shortcut.

"I crossed the vacant lot behind Anderson's garage and down into that drainage ditch gully, and up the other side. You know that little house of Maizie Feuchner's. There ain't any other houses for a block around, and it's all hidden in weeds and bushes."

I knew and I knew Maizie Feuchner's reputation.

"Well, I was cutting through Maizie's lot when Pier came out the door. I ran over and told him Ed Gerrish wanted to see him. He was mad. He grabbed my shoulders and shook me, and yelled that if I ever told where I'd found him he'd throw Dad in the jug. I promised, and we waited there till the storm was over, and then we came up to Gerrish's."

Denny lapsed into silence, and for the next twenty minutes we spoke seldom and nothing happened—nothing but the interminable songs of the frogs, wailing about the wickedness of man.

More minutes fled, and in my weary spirit questionings stirred: perhaps I wasn't such a bright little Sherlock after all. Maybe the murderer of Ed Gerrish was actually hanging in that cave. But why would he have stolen the money when Ed was going to give it to him anyway?

And I thought of Larry Cunningham in jail. He had lied to me, I was convinced, about part of his activities; maybe he had lied about everything. Why?

Something interrupted my ruminations. A sound? I didn't know; I knew only that suddenly my weariness had vanished, replaced by a singing clarity

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of mind, a tightness of nerves. Crouching there, I knew how a cat feels ambushing a sparrow.

But a cat's eyes weren't mine. Nor a cat's ears. Then a sound clinked through the inky air. The gate into Gerrish's yard.

I clamped Denny's wrist and signaled for absolute silence.

SOMEBODY was stumbling through the wreckage, and although he was a shadow buried in shadow I sensed that a frantic necessity for haste rode him.

He paused at the cave. But for the merest second. He came plodding toward us and I locked the breath in my lungs, almost yelling for fear he would blind our eyes with a sudden flash of light. Later he'd know of my presence, but not now, Lordy, not now!

But light was no friend of his. Breathing hard—he'd been running, likely—he crashed through the brambly windbreak, into the field. I counted up to twenty. Then up to twenty again. Then I muttered to Denny:

"We've given him enough rope. Come on."

Picking our way through the bushes, we scrambled erect in the black field and traveled east along its south edge, as fast as groping would permit. Once Denny breathed:

"Gosh, we've lost him."

Warningly, I clamped my hand over his mouth.

We climbed the fence north of the O'Connor place and struck out northeast through the tender shoots of corn.

The barbed strands of another fence scraped toward us; we slid beneath the lowest wire into the drenched grass of a pasture, and started down the slope. From boyhood forays I remembered that a brook looped through this meadow, and as I scanned the black terrain hoping to catch a gleam of starshine in its water, I beheld a sudden streak of light. Instantly, I halted.

It was a flashlight beam, switched on to guide the feet of our quarry from stone to stone across the stream. After yielding a brief glimpse of shadowy legs leaping, the light went out. We waited.

On the next hilltop the light blossomed again while its owner negotiated still another fence; and this time, instead of switching off the light, he carried it out of sight over the brow of the hill.

Crossing the brook I didn't risk my own light, and we splashed in above our ankles. But soaked feet were forgotten as we crept to the hilltop and, on all fours, peered through the fence.

That fence enclosed a nice piece of ground, part of it nurturing young fruit trees, the rest given over to a vegetable garden. Our man was kneeling, his body obstructing the rays from his flashlight, but he wasn't praying, although well he might have been. He was in the midst of a bed of flourishing lettuce, doing something with his hands. Digging.

I put my lips against Denny's ear and whispered, "Wait here." Then I slid beneath the fence.

Gripping my thirty-eight, shifting my weight from tiptoe to tiptoe with infinite caution, I stole toward Homer Chase.

MY INTENTION was to apprise him of my presence by grinding the cold snout of my gun against his neck. But some sentry in the man's frightened brain warned him of danger, for all at once he whirled, so violently that it threw him off balance, and he sat down plop in the crisp lettuce.

My left thumb sent the flashlight beam into his eyes—such crazed eyes as

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I have seen in a trapped animal—and I ordered:

"Don't move."

He had whirled toward the right—a mistake. For that move had thrown his body away from his revolver. It gleamed in the lettuce, just out of his reach, on the edge of the rectangular hole his hands had dug.

I saw him flick a rapid glance toward that gun, and I repeated:

"Don't move. I'll shoot you if you do."

And what he did then astonished me, and filled me with a mixed emotion of shame and loathing and pity. He buried his face in his muddy hands and began to sob. To see a man of his age give way to tears is not pretty. I had thought him made of sterner stuff. He looked like a great, ridiculous, bald-headed baby, sitting there in the lettuce, his legs sprawled in front of him.

"Don't tell on me, Bill," he said. "Don't turn me in."

I said, "It's there in that hole, I suppose. Gerrish's money."

"In a box," he said. "Just like Ed had kept it all these years. I wasn't going to spend it, Bill," he whined, as if in extenuation. "I didn't want it for that."

I said, "You were planting sweet corn this afternoon, weren't you?"

"I'll never eat it, now. It's an awful thing, Bill, to see a noose ahead of you. It's—"

"You were working here," I said, "and you saw a storm coming up. You thought you'd better be getting on home. Isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"So you started toward town, but the clouds got so black they scared you. So you stopped in at Ed Gerrish's. If a big wind came up you knew he had a good cyclone cave. Ed told you he was going to confess—isn't that true?"

"I argued with him," he admitted. "I told him it wasn't fair to me and Charley Cunningham, but that preacher had upset him something terrible."

"Ed had dug up the money," I continued, "and had it on his kitchen table. You were arguing, and all at once he left the house and called in the O'Connor kid. You ducked into the dining room.

"He told the kid to go for Larry Cunningham and Adolph Pier and me. Ed wanted to clean up everything on his conscience all at once. He wanted to pay Larry that lumber bill, and confess to me so I could publish it, and confess to Pier so he could arrest him. Right?"

He nodded, listlessly.

"After Denny O'Connor left, you went into the kitchen and picked up a knife and stabbed him. No, you didn't want his money. You were smart enough to know that those oversize bills would mark you if you tried to spend it. The O'Connor kid had seen them, and he had one. But you stole the money anyway, and you thought you could throw the blame on the preacher.

"You didn't want Ed to confess that I had been right ten years ago—that there was crooked work in building that new schoolhouse. The construction company bribed you and Ed and Charles Cunningham, didn't it?"

HIS tongue licked his quivering lips.

"I never wanted to go in on the deal," he wailed. "Charley Cunningham and Ed talked me into it. Five thousand dollars apiece from the construction company . . ."

I said, "I talked with H. Malloy Ferguson tonight. He remembered that you and Charles Cunningham had deposited about five thousand apiece during 1929

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and early 1930. Ed, of course, was afraid of banks. He buried his.

"Ed was almost a miser," Chase said listlessly.

"You never thought he'd get religion and that his conscience would hurt him so much he'd want to confess. When he told you this afternoon that he was going to confess, you must have seen prison bars ahead of you. You thought of what they could do to you on income tax evasion and what they could do to you for accepting a bribe to vote for that expensive school. So you killed Ed.

"By that time the tornado was coming, but you weren't afraid of tornadoes. You were scared of being found with that corpse. So you took the knife and the money and hiked through Ed's windbreak toward this lot. While you were on your way the tornado hit Ed's house. And then it zoomed up and passed right over your head, going northeast. And after it came the rain."

"How did you know that?"

"Your tracks. I found your foot tracks tonight, leading toward town. That was all right. You had told us that you waited at your lot till the storm was over, and naturally you'd leave tracks in the mud walking to town.

"But you didn't figure that as soon as the rain caught you you'd begin leaving tracks going away from town. The rain smoothed out the tracks you'd left in the dry earth, but as soon as it changed the dry earth to mud you left a record of your walking.

"You came here and buried the knife and the money, and then walked back to Ed's. It was a break for you, the house being destroyed. It gave you self confidence and a bold front. And another break was that Larry Cunningham had got to Ed's just before the tornado. He went into Ed's kitchen and saw his corpse. It scared him. Then he heard the tornado and he ran out to the cave. Mrs. Kritchlow saw him.

"Larry was rattled, and he was afraid people would think he had killed Ed, arguing about the lumber bill. So he lied and said the tornado caught him in Ed's pasture.

"That was fine for you. And you even suggested that maybe the evangelist was the killer. Well, he wasn't. But I think he suspected you. Ed had probably confessed the whole deal with the construction company, and the evangelist must have known that you wouldn't want Ed blabbing about it.

"And then Larry kept playing into your hands. As soon as he heard about Ed having money, he wanted me to lay off the case. He was afraid, I think, that if the whole story came out it would cast a reflection on his dead father—taking that bribe.

"Down at the town hall tonight I said that I thought the evangelist knew who killed Ed. I shouldn't have said that. For it scared you. You made the excuse of going for the sheriff. Oh, you probably went for him, but first you hurried to the park and poked your gun into the evangelist and made him go with you to the cave.

"You made him write that phony confession and then you used your car towrope and made him put his neck into the noose. Well, they'll do the same to your neck, Chase."

HE BLINKED up at me. But the tears had dried on his face now, and craftiness had replaced the fear in his eyes.

"You figured it about right," he said. "The sheriff's at the town hall. I went for him and the coroner after the preacher died. When we got back, Adolph Pier told me that the O'Connor

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kid had said you knew where the money was buried. How did you know that?"

"I didn't."

He gaped.

"I knew you must have buried it out here somewhere, but I didn't know just where. I figured that if you were afraid I knew, you'd hustle out here to get it and hide it somewhere else."

"How did you know I was planting sweet corn today?"

I smiled a little. "You didn't leave all the seed in the ground. I found a grain of corn in the wreckage of Ed Gerrish's dining room."

He said, "I was fidgety when that O'Connor kid was in talking to Ed. I remember having a grain of corn in my mouth and I must have spit it out. Well," he added, all of his old composure returning, "I'm glad you explained everything to me. It'll help me, when I talk to the sheriff."

"What do you mean?"

"It just came to me," he said. "You can't kill me with that gun."

"It's loaded, don't worry."

"Didn't mean that. I meant that I'm the mayor and it's my word against your's. Now you've told me how you caught me, I'll know how to lie out of it. There are ways. Maybe the evangelist buried the money here. He wrote a confession. He'd been a convict.

"If you'd kill me and they'd find his confession, do you think they'd believe all the stuff you've said about me? They'd say you killed me in cold blood on account of our old grudge. Ain't that so?"

I said, "Almost so."

"Almost?"

"We've had a witness listening to what we've said."

His jaw dropped; he scanned the shadows.

"Don't believe it. You're bluffing."

I called, "Denny, have you heard us talking?"

"Every word, Mr. Lewis," he called back.

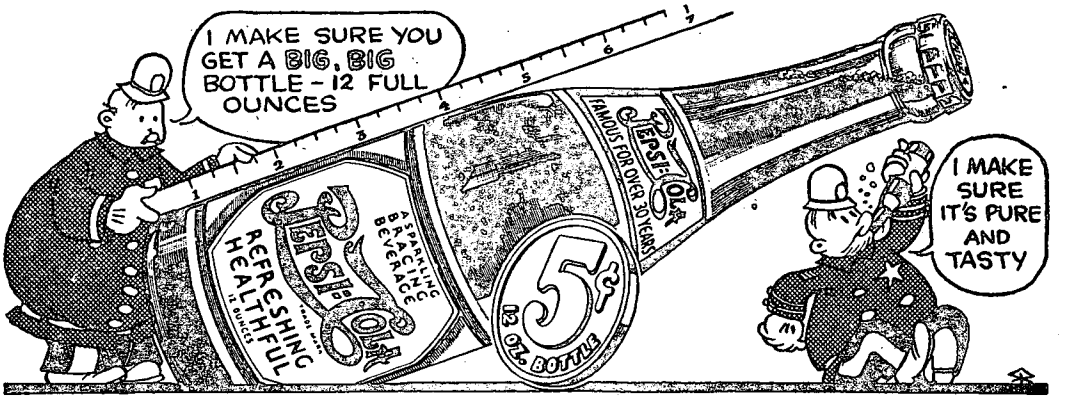
Chase's body had been altering its position as we talked; his legs drawing in, his muscles tensing. And as Denny finished speaking, he flung himself suddenly to the left, scrambling madly for his gun in the lettuce.

"Chase!" I yelled. "Stop! I'll shoot!"

He snatched up the gun and swung it toward me.

I fired. Three times. The bullets found his liver, his groin, his heart. And he died there in the lettuce, his body over the hole where he had buried Gerrish's money box and the kitchen knife.

I hated to kill him, but it seemed the only thing to do.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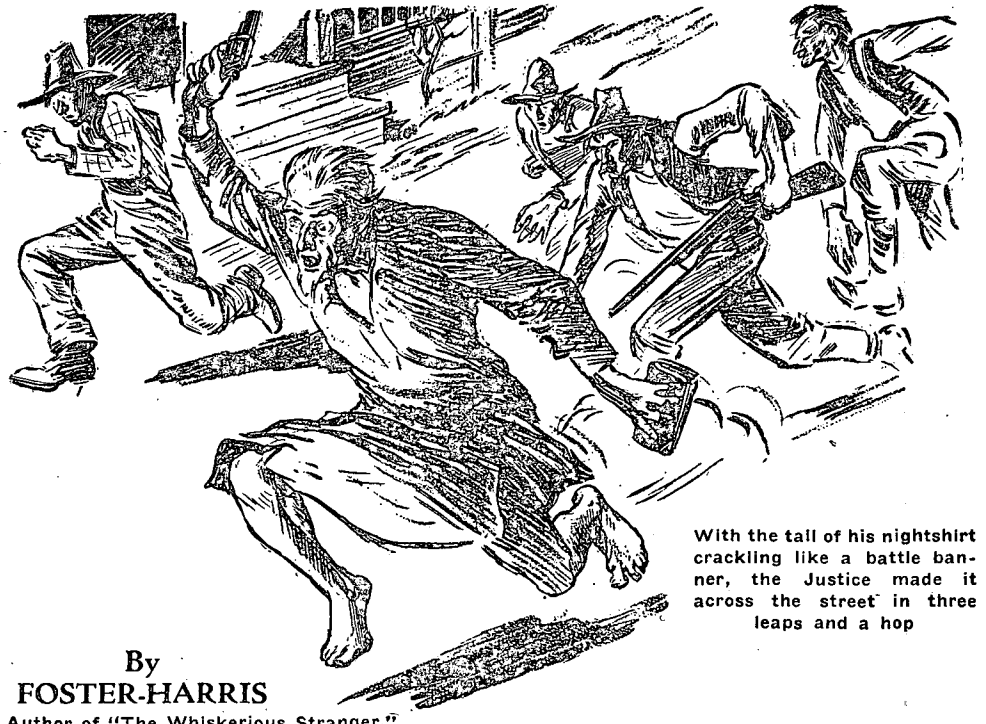

With the tail of his nightshirt crackling like a battle banner, the Justice made it across the street in three leaps and a hop

By
FOSTER-HARRIS
Author of "The Whiskerious Stranger," "Red Commanders," etc.

Justice Plays Too Rough

For uneven and *non compos mentis* dispensing of *habeas corpus* in a little Texas oil town, we unreservedly recommend Justice Jeff Morton, whose methods are often devious and always final

FOR the umpteenth time the distant smash of exploding dynamite crumpled the peace of Paradise, Texas, and for the umpteenth time Justice Jeff Morton squirmed.

It was mid-afternoon, and 'way, 'way past his usual siesta time. But no chance to snooze today. Nary ghost of a chance, the Justice realized resignedly; for after all these happy, backbackward years, progress had burst over Paradise with a boom.

An oil boom, to be exact; and here, right off, here it was insisting on pounding his ear for him, scientifically, after the miserable manner of this much too mechanized age.

Progress, the Justice mused peevishly, no doubt was all right in its place. But it ought to stay there. A man ought to be able to take it or leave it alone. Particularly it oughtn't to insist on working while you slept, or tried to.

And another thing: he didn't at all like the prospect right across the road.

Straight across from where he sat on the gallery of his store, next door to his little home, industrious, sweating aliens to these Texan hills were uprooting what had been the stage sta-

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tion in the great, gone days when Paradise and the Judge were young, with their future still before instead of behind.

They were going to erect a district headquarters for the company that had just struck oil down on Five Mile Flat. And they had been, the Judge conceded reluctantly, most discreet and proper about it all, sending a vice-president to see him, showing him the architect's pretty picture, fairly trapping him into granting permission to build.

Not that a simple peace justice had any more right than a hippo to be granting or withholding building permits and such, but Paradise was peculiar that way. It was incorporated only on the sturdy person of the Judge. For more years than he cared to count, he not only had been the leading citizen and the law; he had also personified the peace and embodied the works, as practically everybody in Texas understood.

An ex-Ranger sergeant, with a bandit's bullet in his leg forever putting a period after his riding days, the Judge had settled in Paradise because it needed a good general store, as well as cleanup, and he had triumphantly accomplished both. He made his living from his store, while perpetuating the peace strictly as a wholesome outdoor hobby. He had been peace justice since the memory of the hills ran not to the contrary; and thus far during his career he had piled up the magnificent total of exactly $4.48 in official fees.

This feat he had accomplished by trying no cases he could settle outside of court, in his own quaint fashion. Running the general store, naturally, he heard everything before it happened.

Just to make it harder, he barred nothing from mayhem to murder. When the wind brought scent of battle brewing it was his custom to hale the potential combatants before him, for an informal palaver to see if they couldn't settle their dispute peaceably among themselves.

If they couldn't, why then always the Justice would offer his "li'l suggestion," invariably fair, and often, indeed, showing the sagacity of a Solomon. But there was also a little joker attached, of lead, to give due weight. Should either party prove unduly stubborn or obstreperous, why then and there, before carrying his quarrel one step farther, he must try shooting it out with the Judge.

And the Judge was the best shot in the hills.

Early in his career, a few tough cases had presumed to doubt the effectiveness of such legal methods. But those also the Judge had contrived to settle, and quite peaceably and permanently, too, in the Paradise cemetery.

To a one-time rootin', tootin', feud-fighting sort of bailiwick he had brought and maintained the peace that passeth understanding, unless one is well acquainted with the persuasive properties of a single action gun.

BUT here was something new: an oil boom, progress. The Judge had an uneasy feeling that presently it was going to sneak up and go off right under his chair.

The dynamiting down the road was an oil seismograph party, hopefully manufacturing and capturing infant earthquakes in a search for more oil. Though why they should, when theirs was the very company that had just found plenty on the Flat on yonder—

Abruptly the Judge came out of his revery, to acknowledge a respectful voice:

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"Uh? Oh, why howdy, Dave Yeager! What you doin' in Paradise?"

It was the young county sheriff, grinning ingratiatingly, and reaching for his wide San Fran. He was making a good sheriff, and the Judge approved of him, which he knew. Just the same, he had been raised in the Paradise bailiwick, and remembered perfectly the code of conduct for sheriffs, even good ones, while in the Presence. He took off the hat and held it.

"Just happened to be drivin' through, Judge, sir," he explained. "Whew, hot, ain't it! What you think of your new oil boom now?"

"Huh!" said the Justice unmistakably, and shifted his game leg from its place in the sun on the gallery rail. Noise or no noise, his foot had gone to sleep anyhow, he noted wryly. "Uh, how's that gal friend of yours, Sally, comin' along with her lawsuin', now that her place is oil land?" he asked; and the sheriff promptly gloomed.

"Aw, she ain't, Judge, sir," he said. "You know what? Them dirty, loot-huntin' lawyers are sayin' now it's the Mallews really own that place. Can you tie that! Oh, yeah, and somethin' else, I come by apurpose to show you—"

He delved into his pockets, producing a somewhat worn newspaper clipping. "You see this in the *Express* this mornin'? Bucky Mallew's headin' back to this part of the world. Kidnapped a G-man, he did, in Santone last night, and held him two hours."

"Kidnapped a G-man!" The Judge's bush brows went high. "Well, would you know! The crazy little killer! Now why?"

"Why, to load his pistol for him. See?" The sheriff pointed. "It says there. He's got him one of them new .357 Magnums the G-men are packin'. You know, the kind that's so powerful you just hit a man's hat and it'll give him creases in his face, even if he ain't even under it. You just can't buy shells for them guns anywheres, you know."

"So Bucky, he just has to catch him a G-man ever' time he wants to reload, huh?" The Judge's voice was dry. "That's handy. But what do they think of him supplying hisself thataway, at government expense?"

"I imagine they're agin it," opined the sheriff, who was a master at Scotch exaggeration of that sort. "But since he's back down here, and loadin' up for bear or somethin', well I just wondered. If you should happen to see him now, or—"

"If I do, I'll call you," cut in the Justice. "To help identify the body. Dave, for five years now I just been hopin' that there road runner would come home to roost. The way he's been a disgracin' the good name of Paradise! Gittin' it drug through all the newspapers. And you know? You know—"

BREATHING fire, the Justice jabbed at one of his sorest memories, a crowning insult: "He owes me for three boxes of rifle shells, too, the very ones he used to quit the county on! Come in here, he did, bold as brass, while I was out a lookin' for him, and made Clem charge 'em. And then fired one at me. If ever I get sight of him!"

The old man snorted.

"Yeah? Well, if you do, Judge, sir, for Pete's sake don't dun him wrong." Yeager grinned. Quite incurably, he was afflicted with that sort of thing, too. "That Bucky, he's gone a fur piece down in the world since you use to paddle his pants, Judge," he added, more soberly. "He's a real killer. Pub-

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lic Enemy Number Two and a Quarter he's rated now, and expectin' a big markdown any minute."

"He'll git cut down below cost if he's really foolin' with them government men," predicted the Judge flatly. "Of if ever I catch him— Uh, yeah?"

The Judge's gaunt clerk, Clem Allen, was calling a question from inside the store.

"It's over there shoved behind the peaches, Clem," the Justice answered. "That you wantin' it, Aunt Holley? Knowed you would. Just had the one can left, so I saved it for you. One of these oil men was tryin' to buy some off me, just this mornin'."

"So I bet you sold him one of them George Washington's original cherry roots, instead, huh?" murmured the sheriff, who had also bought his first cigar—or so he claimed—from the same box. Further, he had once distressed the credulous Clem no end by telling him solemnly that was a Confederate revenue stamp on that box, liable to get him into all sorts of trouble. "Well; I got to be moseyin'," he said cheerfully, and took a step backward, before resuming his hat.

"Promised I'd go by and pick Sally up, on my way back. She's over't the old home place, goin' through all the old trunks and boxes again, to see if she can find any more papers or letter that'll help her in that suit. Fine way to spend her Saturday off, huh?"

The judge nodded serenely.

"You tell her if I can be of any help, just let me know," directed the Judge, and got up. More customers, strangers —oil workers by their laced boots and khakis—were coming into the store. Didn't seem like hot afternoon meant a thing to these oil men, the Judge mused wistfully, as he limped in to serve them.

HE HAD scarcely made their change when more workers poured in, this time a half dozen of the stage station excavators from across the street. They were carrying what looked like a just-unearthed baby's coffin.

"Found this under all them rocks in the old basement, Judge, sir, and brought it right over to you," their leader announced, and waved his minions to set their burden down. "I knowed you'd want to take charge. It's one of them old Wells Fargo chests, like the stage coaches carried. And just feel the heft of it! It's fulla somethin', gold mebbe."

"Yeh?" Interested, the Justice hobbled over. It was entirely possible this might be a treasure find. Treasures, of one sort and another, assuredly had moved through these hills for two hundred years and more. Gold and silver bars in the packs of Conquistadores, army payrolls, loot of raiders and revolutionists and outlaws. Lost treasure. The hot, gripping gleam of it was in the staring eyes, even the Judge's.

"Yeah, it's a sure enough Wells Fargo strongbox, all right," he agreed; and for a swift instant memory took him back. "Ain't likely anything in it, though. Or they wouldn't —uh, uhhh!" He had tried lifting one end. And not only was it heavy; it also clanked.

"Hand me down one of them pinch-bars, Clem," he ordered, and knelt quickly. The old box was still strong enough to provide a neat problem. It was iron bound, and though its brawny oak was battered, very decidedly it was neither busted nor bent.

The ancient padlock guarding the heavy hasp, however, was another matter. After a taste of the Justice's prying ways, it suddenly lost its grip. And

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those avid eyes fairly shoved as the Judge flung open the strongbox lid.

Inside were six building bricks, an assortment of rusted wagon bolts and scrap iron, the fragile mummies of several spiders, and an ancient newspaper, from whose yellowed edges ancient mice had piecemealed a record of how they too had once been sheltered beneath Wells Fargo's mighty wing. That was all; and of a sudden it was a little sad.

"Well, I did find a quarter once," said one of the oil workers hopefully.

"I guess you'll be wantin' the box anyways, won't you, Judge?" the leader was asking. "Kind of a—souvenir of back when, huh?" The Judge nodded, his faint smile infinitely remote across the years. But then abruptly he was all affability.

"Why, now, I take that mighty kindly of you boys. It will make a right interestin' reminder, to show here in the store. Yes sir, and—Clem, how about settin' all the boys up to a soda pop, now, on the house!"

Brightening, they trooped toward the cooler near the door, and of a sudden the Judge was aware of the disapproving glare of Aunt Holley.

Among the puritans of Paradise, Aunt Holley was indeed a proud and painful pillar—except for that little matter of snuff, of course, her one concession to Satan—and it was quite apparent that the Judge had erred. But there was nothing wrong with his courtesy, at any rate, for he bowed instantly, raising the bid.

"And, uh, won't you honor us by joining us, ma'am?"

"Hmph!" It was plain Aunt Holley would not. "Seems to me like a Justice would be seein' about gittin' valuable property back to its lawful owners," she said.

"You mean the strongbox here? Why, madam, I'm surprised!" murmured the Justice with gentle reproach. "I am so. And your own sister's boy William plannin' to be a lawyer, too! Don't you know that accordin' to the revised statutes of Texas, havin' abandoned the property *absque hoc,* the stage company just plain left me as *alcalde* here, in *loco parentis,* with *pleno jure* and *non compos mentis?* Don't tell me you didn't know that!

"Oh!" said Aunt Holley faintly, and went back to look at the tinware. With placid satisfaction, the Justice turned again to his prize, transferring the contained debris to an empty corn flakes carton. He was just finishing, when he was interrupted again.

THIS time it was by a fugitive from a magazine cover—a range romance magazine undoubtedly, for she was wearing boots and trim levis. With a glad beam, the Justice swung.

"Why, Sally Davis!" Hastily, he drywashed both his hands on his trousers, before holding them out. "Ain't seen you in how long! But what you doin' here? Dave Yeager just left here not twenty minutes ago, to pick you up. You must of missed him."

"I meant to, Judge, sir." It was obvious the youngster was vastly excited about something. Like shopworn frost, a strand of cobweb was caught across her black bob, and there was a large smudge of brown dust on her small, straight nose.

The effect was not at all unpleasant, the Judge thought. It hinted of determination and go behind that eager face, and he knew there was plenty. Of both!

He had known Sally all her life, had known her folks, even her grand-

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father, for that matter. And her grandfather, semi-legendary old Mustang Davis, had been one of the original settlers in Paradise, a soldier of the Texan Revolution.

"Look what I've found, Judge, look!" In spite of her palpable effort at control, her voice ran a little scale. "It—it was behind the lining in Grandma's big trunk, in the barn. I'd looked there a dozen times. It's Grandpa's land bounty warrant I need to prove title to the ranch. Isn't it? Isn't it, now!"

"Why—" The Judge fumbled hastily for his spectacles, hooking them on his nose. There was an abrupt silence as he scanned the fragile, foxed paper, and in it he was aware of Aunt Holley, and that group up front, all listening avidly.

"The Republic of Texas," he read in a murmur. "To Captain Richard Marion Davis, for services . . . six hundred and forty acres of land located . . ." His lips tightened, and his eyes hurried on, then lifted with a pleased glow.

"Yep. Yep, it's your grandpa's warrant," he affirmed decisively. "The land they give him for bein' a soldier. That's the legal description right there, the section your old home place's on. And—"

"And it's all I'll need to cinch my title!" Sally Davis' voice was rapturous. "The lawyers said if only we could find it! They knew it had been issued, but there wasn't any record; the records were lost when the capitol burned, you know, back in the Eighties. Now I can get my lease money, and pay off my debts and—and—"

"Yes?" said the Judge, softly, and smiled very broadly at her glorious blush. He knew the whole story, of course. A most gallant little story he thought it was. Reagan Davis, Sally's father, hadn't been much of a manager. Dying, had left a whole flock of debts. But because of the blood that was in him, he had at least clung to his homestead. And just as fiercely, Sally also had kept it.

Because Texas law does not permit alienation of a homestead for debt, Sally easily might have escaped responsibility for her father's obligations. But she had shouldered them. A tiny person, she could not run the ranch alone. But she could and did teach English in the county seat high school, she had rented the ranch to a family who at least were making the taxes, and bit by bit she was paying those debts.

The catch was, she couldn't—or rather wouldn't—marry Dave Yeager with those debts as her dowry. For the past five years Dave had been her slave. He had argued with her till his jaws ached that it was a man's place to work and pay off debts like those; and in the arguing, had also made it plain his wife wasn't going to work outside her home.

And since Sally wouldn't sell the place—there you were.

But with the oil strike on Five Mile Flat, lease buyers had swept the Paradise area and Sally's ranch had turned out right in the trend. It was still quite a way from production, and maybe never would have real wells on it. Just the same, buyers had offered her more than enough to pay off all her debts for her lease alone, leaving her the royalty to gamble on. Wedding bells, it had seemed, were all set to peal.

Then shyster lease busters had bobbed up with a repeal campaign.

"A thousand lawsuits for every new oil strike," they say in the oil country, and the ratio is probably too low. Be-

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cause of the enormous potential fortunes involved, utterly unscrupulous, well financed vultures swarm each new discovery area, seeking flaws in land titles upon which to seize and sue.

They had tackled Sally, and with the Mallews for catspaws, former neighbors of the Davises, they might have robbed her beyond repair, as the Judge appreciated only too well. For distinctly the Mallews were bad medicine in anybody's case.

ONETIME accepted residents in Paradise, the Mallews had gone snake, and so fallen from grace. Caught red-handed, harboring a reptilian sort of robber in his bosom, the old man of the clan had departed under a cloud.

A cloud of powder smoke, to be precise, emitted in rapid running order by the Judge's Ranger six-shooter. Inasmuch as the Judge had just accomplished a much more difficult and satisfying shot at the robber, it was universally conceded he could have plugged old man Mallew too, dead easy, had he really wished. And for some years now the Justice very regretfully had wished he had wished.

But that, of course, was an afterthought, brought on by Bucky Mallew.

At the time of the old man's exodus, Bucky had been merely the local nuisance, instead of National Enemy Whatever-the-quotation-was-now, and the "Fiend from Paradise," as the newspapers loved to cover him with dubious phrase. The mere sight of those stories inevitably brought the Justice to a hard boil.

But here, at least, was a stopper to some part of the plans of the wicked. The Judge grinned, like a boy.

"Yes ma'am, honey, this certainly ought to leave 'em without even a blackleg to stand on," he said enthusiastically. "I—what's wrong?"

"Oh, I—I thought—" The girl had whirled toward the door, with a panicky gasp. Outside a car was pulling up—the sheriff's. "I thought it was somebody else, Judge," Sally explained confusedly. "That's why I came to see you. I'm—sorta scared."

"Scared!" The Judge's brows hiked in high amaze. "You? No! Why?"

"There was a man in the barn when I found that warrant, Judge. He was on the leanto roof, I mean, watching me through the cracks. He ducked back into the brush when I screamed and ran for the house, but I saw him and I—I'm practically certain it was Bucky Mallew."

"Bucky Mallew out here!" The girl's quick, warning shake of her head quenched the Judge's astounded explosion, and she swung again. Grinning, Dave Yeager was coming in the doorway now, probably the only man up front there who hadn't heard. Sally held out a small hand.

"Say, how come you didn't wait for me?" Dave demanded reproachfully. "I wasn't late. They told me—" But Sally was tugging at his big fingers, eagerly interrupting.

"Look, Dave! Look what I found in the old trunk. It's really the land warrant; the Judge says so. Show him, Judge, show him."

"Yeah, they was tellin' me." The sheriff nodded, and studied the paper with suddenly delighted eyes. "Yipee!" he let loose. "That's what it is! You got 'em, kid! You got 'em! But what was all this about some guy snooping on you they was trying to tell me?"

"Why, I—" Appealingly, Sally's dark eyes went to the Judge's and the old autocrat stepped instantly into the breach.

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"That was part of what Sally was just takin' up with me, sonny," he said dryly. "Now you're so happy thinkin' you're gonna git to marry you an oil heiress and quit workin', why mebbe we can git back to business. This here, Dave Yeager, is a conference involvin' beauty and brains, so you don't qualify neither way. Supposin' you do somethin' you can while we augur, though —finish cleanin' out that there box."

With a dismissing gesture, he indicated the Wells Fargo chest.

"But—" began the sheriff; and caught the magisterial eye. "Go ahead, if you wanta," invited the Judge serenely. "Butt. But if you leave go just one more bleat, even a li'l one, I'm gonna fine you ten dollars. For wearin' your hat in the presence of the court."

He waved imperiously, and Yeager went, while nobody laughed. You did not laugh at the Judge's orders. Even the oil workers present knew that, and knew also that twice, on more serious previous occasions, the Justice had ordered offending high sheriffs out of his bailiwick. They had gone, too. Nor had they returned, not even with the militia.

Drawing Sally back toward the tinware counter, the Judge looked at Aunt Holley with a suggestive eye, and she also took the hint and her departure.

"You tryin' to tell me you think Bucky Mallew's back to take a hand agin you?" he inquired in a murmur. "No!" But the girl was nodding violently.

"It was Bucky, Judge! And now he knows I've found this warrant. It makes all the difference in the world in my case, and—and he knows that, too. If he ever gets his hands on it, it may be worth more than any bank he ever robbed. I just don't know what to do, Judge. Both my lawyers out of town till court takes up again Tuesday, and everything closed for the weekend, and . . . the kind of gunman he is now—"

SHE didn't finish. But her eyes went betrayingly toward Dave, then tried to hide their anxiety under long lashes. The Justice nodded slowly.

"Dave's plenty able to take care of himself, Sally. And he's sheriff," he said, with quiet meaning. "Must'nt forget that. But under the circumstances—"

He reached for the warrant, taking it out of her fingers and lifting his voice—just enough, he calculated, to reach those ears, including Aunt Holley's, still straining up front.

"Don't you fret your mind none whatever about it, child. I'll take care of it for you. Keep it safe, and bring it in with me when I come. I got to go to the courthouse 'bout Tuesday anyways. Now forgit it."

Pocketing the precious paper, he swung back toward where the sheriff was dutifully stooping over the strongbox. And that minion, who also had heard all, of course, turned an indignant eye on Sally.

"Don't you trust me to keep that safe?" he wanted to know. "What's the idea—"

Very sweetly the Judge answered him, before he could go on, or Sally find words.

"As sheriff, you really ain't expected to have any idea, Davy, son. You're just expected now to drive this young lady home safe and see she stays safe. Understand all that? All right, git!"

When they had gone, he stood for a long moment regarding the ancient chest, then dragged it around behind the counter, out of sight, and toward

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his desk. There he sat down in his squeaky swivel chair and apparently went into a coma.

Despairing of anything further interesting, the group up front, including Aunt Holley, finally drifted out. Clem Allen was just heading for the back on catfeet when the Justice spoke.

"Clem. Clem, did you ever hear tell of Poe's 'Purloined Letter'?"

"Poe?" Clem's pale eyes blinked bewilderedly. "John W. Poe, you mean, Judge, the law officer helped catch Billy the Kid? No sir! I never knowed anybody even had the nerve to try to purloin anything from—"

"Edgar Allen Poe, Clem," corrected the Justice. "Poe, the writer. They was two of 'em, both famous. Pretty good, for just a couple of Poe boys, huh? That there letter gives me an idee."

He began to delve into his desk, and spoke over his shoulder. "Wonder if you'd mind lookin' in the storeroom and seein' if you can find that length of log chain we had, Clem? Oh yeah, and the big padlock."

WHEN Clem returned with the chain, he discovered the Judge had dragged the strongbox clear up front again, and was busily engaged in removing the chewing tobacco cutouts from the solitary show window.

"There now," he grunted. "Help me lift her in, now, will you? Keerful! Keerful! There! Real show piece, this old stagecoach chest, Clem, a mighty interestin' relic of Paradise's purple past. Don't you think? Want her where people can see her. Now then, just a minute."

Hobbling back, he got a brace and bit out of stock, with which he proceeded to bore a couple of holes through the false flooring on each side of the chest. Then he snapped a padlock on the ancient hasp, and took the chain from his clerk, starting to poke it through one of the holes.

"Kind of crawl under there now and poke her back up, will you?" he panted. "I'm goin' to bring the chain up and around, see? Chain her right to the window. Won't be nobody able to lift her out then, and they can't just twist the chest and slide her out neither; window's too narrow. She'll be plumb safe."

"Safe?" For one of the rare times in his career, Clem Allen questioned supreme authority. "Uh—uh, but what in the name of mud, Judge? Why you scar't anybody would be a wantin' to steal the dang thing?"

(*Please turn page*)

Happy Relief From Painful Backache

Caused by Tired Kidneys

Many of those gnawing, nagging, painful backaches people blame on colds or strains are often caused by tired kidneys — and may be relieved when treated in the right way.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)

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"You'd just be surprised what some folks will try to steal nowdays, Clem," said the Judge darkly. "This here is a real, genuine an-tick, don't you realize? Old papers, old chests, old shavin' mugs, an-ticks like that, why they're just goin' hog wild about 'em, hog wild. Here now, crawl under and poke me up that chain."

When the perspiring Clem had duly complied, the Justice pulled the chain taut about the box, and locked the ends with the second padlock. "There!" he announced to the just emerging Clem. "And if you git time, I want you should wash the winder here, too. Clem. Want people to see this here. I bet it interests practic'ly everybody."

"I bet they think you've—" began Clem, and gulped hard. "Yeah, yeah, I mean I bet it does too," he substituted, with admirable restraint.

And in that he was eminently right, for it certainly did interest everybody; particularly the locks and chain. The heat of the afternoon was beginning to wane now. The blue, smoky haze of the hills was filling the narrow, wooded valleys.

Trade in the store picked up briskly. While the Judge was waiting on Mrs. Holbrook, who boarded quite a few of the oil workers at her place down the road, a roaring caravan of trucks went by, and he pricked up his ears belligerently.

It was the seismograph party that had been shooting down the road, he knew, swinging in to park for the night as usual behind the stage station lot that would presently be garage and headquarters. By the time he had finished with Mrs. Holbrook and started bristling toward the door, big Bob Segar, chief of the party, was just coming in.

"Listen, you young squirt," the Justice commanded him, "when I give you permission to keep your geo—"

"Geophysical trucks," supplied Segar, in well intended error; and wilted under the Judge's glare.

"Your dang earthquake catchin' contraptions—" the Judge sounded as if he were pronouncing death sentence—"in town here, I told you plain not to bring in no dynamite, because it was dangerous. Didn't I?"

"Why, yes sir," admitted Segar meekly. "And I—"

"And you been doin' it anyway, ain't you? Well, young man, you're a stranger here and entitled to your one warnin'. Here she is. You leave me catch you doin' it just one more time and you won't be workin' around here no more. Mebbe you won't be workin', you sabe?"

"I—yes sir. I'm sorry." Bob Segar, toughest party chief in the company's geophysical department, was the picture of submission. In addition to other abilities, Segar was a good judge of men.

"I was just coming over to tell you, sir, we did leave part of a case in the supply tent this morning," he informed humbly. "And somebody's swiped it. Caps, wire, and six sticks of giant."

"You see! You see!" Every bristle in the Judge's brows pointed the moral. "No tellin' what devilment somebody's plannin'! All right, all right, I'll look into it. But don't you forgit what I said."

He waved dismissal, and Segar pushed his way out, through mates who would have given two days' pay to laugh, but likewise knew something of men and didn't dare.

AT EIGHT o'clock, when the Judge closed the store for the night, the window before that chest had been

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washed and polished so thoroughly it looked as if it didn't belong.

And it was also noted, without comment, by Clem, that the Justice took a few minutes to clean and inspect his ancient six-shooter before leaving. Being a prudent man, Clem not only locked his door when he retired to his room in the rear; he also put a chair under the knob.

Opening his window six inches to the night breeze, he grinned as he thought of the Judge lying in his bedroom window across the street there, just practically in biscuit-tossing distance of that chest—and kept his opinion of an-ticks and any possible values therein to himself.

As with its heavenly synonym, so with the Judge's earthly Paradise; there was no night life there, either—or hadn't been until his oil strike.

But it was all coming, the Justice knew wearily, as he prepared himself for bed. Hijackers, tinhorns, jackleg lawyers, bright lights and trouble, merciless killers like that Bucky Mallew. It made him tired to think of it, but it didn't worry him, somehow. He put his pistol and wallet under his pillow as usual, and drifted away.

Sleeping thus on a hair trigger, as a general thing he did a better job of policing Paradise from his bed than other owl officers might have accomplished on the beat, allegedly awake. But tonight, it seemed, his were unusually sound slumbers, even for the just.

Or possibly he was a little off in his estimate of the traveling powers of gossip and gunmen. At any rate, when he came to with a flying start for that six-shooter, he knew it must be nearly one o'clock. Across the street somebody—Clem, undoubtedly, by the quavering note of murder on the high C's—was certainly bearing down on the SOS.

Pistol in one hand, wallet in the other, and the tail of his nightshirt crackling like a battle banner, the Justice made it across the street in three leaps and a hop, and found the window unsmashed, the front door still locked and apparently intact.

He had to bellow like a buffalo to make the unwitted Clem shut up and come open up. By that time lights were appearing in at least half of Paradise's several houses. Bearing a lamp, Clem came weaving weirdly, looking like a diabetic haunt, and contrived to unbolt the door.

"He—he hit me, Judge!" he babbled. "Bucky Mallew! Clumb right in my window, he did, and says, 'Hi, punk! Have the Judge put this on the cuffo too.' And then he pistol-whipped me, knocked me cold!"

"He did, did he? Bucky Mellew, you sure? Ow!" The Judge had just discovered some ironwear on the floor, with his bare toes. Hopping and holding his foot, he half-swung so he was facing the window in which he had placed the chest. And, behind him, he heard Clem's horrified gasp.

"Why it's—gone!" Clem lifted the lamp high. "Oh my goody, he's took it! He's took your an-tick! Pried the floorboards it was chained to loose and turned 'em around and slid the box right out!"

"And would you like to tell everybody the pinchbar he done it with was took out of stock, too?" inquired the Judge grimly, holding it up.

There were plenty by now to see and hear. Half the town, it seemed, already was there, blinking and gaping. Reinforcements were coming from the oil workers' camp, back of the stage station; and from down the street,

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Aunt Holley, in a wrapper and an expression of I knew it!

The Judge grunted, noted swiftly that the back door was wide open, and went paddling to investigate. Save for the pistol, his long white nightie made him look quite in keeping for Paradise, up yonder, if not down here.

BUT there was nothing to be discovered in the silent blackness behind the store. Mr. Mallew quite plainly had departed, and the chest with him.

Nodding, almost as if he'd expected that, the Judge started to turn back; then jumped at the snarl of a siren.

It was the sheriff, he found, as he hurried up front. A car with a crimson roadlight was at the door, and a grim, very different looking Dave Yeager was inspecting the ruined window. Loose tongues had told him what had happened before the Judge could arrive. He swung, with a belligerent, challenging jut to his square jaw.

"You had Sally's land warrant in that chest, didn't you?" he charged. "Of all the fool tricks! Chainin' it down, so even a halfwit could guess! And now look how you've let that hoodlum outsmart you; look!"

"Well it—seemed like a smart idee, at the time," said the Justice, so humbly that the sheriff blinked and unboiled that expression of his, just the faintest trifle. "Uh, he's got away with it, anyhow. Clem says—" With a sudden small revival of his old fire, the Judge stopped, glaring.

"But, say! How come you got here so quick, anyways?"

"I was phoned for," said Yeager tartly. "One of your, uh, citizens phoned me 'about midnight, said, uh, said he couldn't sleep for thinkin' of what you were doin'. So I—"

"He? Or she?" asked the Justice, but drew no answer. With champing impatience, Yeager was already surging for the back door, unlimbering a flashlight. Seeming all at once very old and tired, the Justice elaborately ignored the triumphantly defiant Aunt Holley and headed back across the street, to get into more judicial attire.

En route, he did pause to pass a low-voiced order to one of the oil men that Bob Segar be produced for him pronto. And when, a minute or so later, he came out of his little house, duly arrayed, and found the seismograph party chief waiting for him, he seemed almost his old self again.

"Son, when you first come in here, you told me them seismograph instruments of your'n was so sensitive you could hear a gnat sneezin', two mile off. You reckon you could pick up a dynamite explosion, and tell which direction it was from you, now?"

"Can I—huh!" Being an oil man, Mr. Segar was plenty quick on the pickup. "Oh—oh! So you think—"

"Why, I try to," broke in the Judge, impatiently. "But suppose you leave me ask the questions. Can you, pretty quick, or can't you?"

"I can sure try," nodded Segar, a bit dubious. "Of course those instruments aren't intended for anything like that, but maybe I can jazz 'em around to do it. Maybe."

"Well, go try. Git goin'." The Judge said the last to Segar's back.

"Gone! So that's why you figure the dirty hood swiped our dynamite, huh! Why the—" came back in a receding crackle, and the Justice grunted approvingly.

"Yuh!" he said, and limped on over toward the store. Coming back on the run for his car, Yeager shot by, barely hesitating for a few words.

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"He's horseback. Tracks out back, where he slung that box up and climbed on. Headed north. He won't go far, packin' that big thing. . . ." The rest was lost as the car roared off. And this time without even a grunt, the Justice hobbled on, to sit down in his ancient gallery chair.

Excited citizens tried to quiz him, but he stopped that with an imperious wave of a gnarled hand. Over where the seismograph trucks were parked, behind the stage station lot, there was furious activity, he could see.

The big instrument truck was alight, and men were running out from it, stringing lines for detectors to be placed against the ground to catch the expected vibrations. They appeared to be fanning out as toward the four corners of a big square.

"If you fellers would jest quit jawin' and stompin' around, now, mebbe we'd hear somethin' ourselves," the Judge spoke up sharply, and with effect. After which he shut his eyes and apparently went to sleep.

NOT that he really did, of course. Actually he was just listening; and, fortunately for the other strained and waving ears of Paradise, he didn't have to hold the pose long. In less than four minutes there was a yell from the instrument truck, then a brief period of terrific suspense, then Bob Segar, on the high lope.

"Picked up the blast, all right, Judge," he shouted as he came. "He's blowed the strongbox. Almost due south of here, and at a guess just about two miles. Now what? Do we tear after him?"

Strangely, the Justice seemed almost to have lost interest. With a yawn, he leaned back in his chair. "We-ll, now, dark as it is—" he grunted, and hesitated. "Hold on! Ain't that the sheriff comin' back?"

It was the sheriff, the scarlet headlights of his car slashing a pathway for him through the throng about the gallery. Brakes snarling, he stopped right in front of the Justice, and his bark was fascinating in its baffled eagerness.

"What's the excitement? You learned something. Got a lead? Ain't a sign of a horse track anywhere on the road north."

"You wasn't really expectin' him to go straight, now was you?" inquired the Justice scornfully. "Say, now! Some of these here days, Dave, you're really gonna have to read up on these here criminals, yeah and on science, too. Wonderful thing, science. Now Segar and the boys here, they been a demonstratin' that fact, yes sir. And locatin' him, I bet you! Locatin' him by ear, with their seismograph outfit."

"Huh?" The sheriff jerked amazedly, mouth open. But the Justice was going on "Yes sir, that seismograph say somebody's just exploded somethin' about two miles due south of here, and I bet you a nickel it was Bucky Mallew bustin' into that box. Likely he was down in the bottom of Turtle Canyon, since we never heer'd by ear, too. But if you was to ask at old man Sears' place, down there close—Hey! Hey, hold on!"

BUT the sheriff had let go all holds and again was departing, like a Buck Rogers rocket. With a magnificent sprint and leap, big Bob Segar just did manage to go along. Fanning disgustedly at the departing enthusiasts' combined dust, the Justice settled back again in his chair.

"You—you figger that really was Bucky Mallew, Judge, sir? You think

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Dave'll catch him?" an excited adherent dared ask.

The judge pondered.

"Well, now, it just stands to reason, some of these days that there Bucky's gonna git too smart for his pants," he opined gravely. "I shore would admire to have it said he got ketched up with right down here where he started. Killin' and robbin' and gittin' the good name of Paradise drug through all the papers—why he couldn't of been born in Oklahoma, now, like a regular outlaw, insteada here!"

Inexpressibly saddened, apparently, by the inscrutable ways of Providence in thus scattering its hot sports, the Justice shook his head and reserved further comment, while time trifled on.

But once more, happily, the wait only seemed longer. Actually it was but a few minutes before the red glare of the sheriff's car came swinging back, and Yeager stepped out, his face oddly drawn.

"Well, we found him," he announced in a taut voice. "Old man Sears saw the flame. It was Bucky Mallew all right, but he was—all blowed to pieces. Looked like he'd set that dynamite off accidental, fixin' to blow the box open."

"What give you the idee he was even tryin' to blow the box, instead of just shootin' his way in, or bustin' it with an ax, as he would of?" inquired the Judge, and there was a sharp gasp from Bob Segar.

"Oh-oh! So that's what really went with our dynamite and caps! I thought it was funny you—" Quick on the pickup, Mr. Segar gulped.

"But—but the box was just plain blowed to—Sally's land warrant—" The sheriff was strangling in agony. Educationally, the Judge let him die the death before offering a helping hand.

"Sally's warrant? Well, what on earth you worryin' about that for?" he inquired and produced it from his ancient wallet. "Did you think," he asked virtuously, "I'd risk havin' it purloined now just to help a bad man blow?"

BIG BOY TAKES A TIP
BOB: Say, fellow, are you taking Ex-Lax? Thought that was for women and kids.
JIM: Wrong, Big Boy! I've been taking Ex-Lax for years. It fixes me up fine!
BOB: Oh yeah! Well, I'm pretty husky... I need a laxative with a wallop.
JIM: Don't kid yourself! Ex-Lax tastes good, but it's plenty effective!
LATER
BOB: Thanks for the tip, pal! I tried Ex-Lax and it's great stuff!
JIM: What did I tell you! It's the only laxative we ever use in our family.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.
10¢ and 25¢
EX-LAX
THE CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE

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$1000 Every Thursday

By JACK BYRNE

THOMAS HARWOOD, young attorney, has succeeded in finding the heirs of three original investors in the KATY BELLE mining stock, thus completing half of the strange job assigned him by

JONAS G. GALWAY, gruff old robber baron who has conceived the plan of shaving thousands off his income tax and shaming the pension-planners by reviving Katy Belle, paying the investors or their heirs $1,000 every Thursday. He is being abetted by

SUSAN GALWAY, his niece: a very good-looking and very spirited young lady who has managed to get under Harwood's skin without breaking down his resistance. For Harwood, scared out by grandpa's millions, is paying mighty close attention to his work.

The score so far:

MRS. JULIA O'LEARY, left by her children to eke out a living as a chambermaid, accepts her thousands and sends the children packing.

LUCIAN HOLDCRAFT III, clerking in a department store and giving his all to a leftist organization, hears the good news and strikes out for Michigan to join the *bourgeoisie*. To the leftist group he bequeaths, out of his inheritance, a Bronx cheer.

DORIS MINNICK, singing in a Chicago night spot under the name of VERONICA VINE, is ripe for rebellion when Thomas Harwood appears. When the thousand-dollar checks are presented to her she acts to break the ties that have held her so long—leave Perrin, the racketeer, and run away with a young piano player.

But as this new life opens on the hope that Harwood has brought, Perrin catches her getting ready to leave; pulls a gun on the musician. Doris Minnick runs into the line of fire to shield him, and—

She will never cash the checks that were for her.

This story began in the Argosy for March 23

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THUS far Harwood has gone. Ahead of him are three more lives to make—or break—with his checks from the Katy Belle. But the strangest and the toughest of these cases Galway thinks he will reserve for himself. This is

Old Doc PICKERING, the only survivor of Galway's original partners, who has kept a deep and mysterious silence since the Katy Belle was revived. He not only hasn't acknowledged his checks—he hasn't cashed them!

Susan wonders about that; and her uncle seems to know more than he will tell. . . .

CHAPTER XI

DESTINY COMES BY TRAIN

THE Southwest Limited, six hours out of St. Louis, plowed the evening murk with disdainful Roman nose. Through the glowworm clusters of the little prairie towns she swept, the streamlined beauty, giving them the roaring swish of her skirts or perhaps a small sad hoot as her condescension.

In the smoking lounge a commercial traveler (hardware and plumbing, the most complete line west of the Mississippi) was collecting a foursome at bridge. "How about you, brother?" he asked. "A quiet rubber, a fiftieth, just to pass the time."

"I don't play," lied Thomas Harwood. "But thanks just the same."

In his lap was a newspaper he could not read. The headlines, for all the sense they made to him tonight, might have been jottings in the Khotanese upon current affairs on the planet Saturn.

He refused to hear the lorelei songs of the corner radio. If he sat and watched the rushing outer emptiness, he hoped he might hypnotize himself to slumber. A long dead sleep was what he needed.

"Personally," said the tweedy man who smoked a pipe, "I don't care one way or another about these Wheelock pensions. I'm in the grocery trade and us fellows are bound to get our share of whatever money is floating around. I say we're in an age of progress. We got to try new things all the time."

"Bud ids all teoredical," the fat man (cigar) protested. "To teories I say pooey. Can we ead teories? You saw in Canada what happens such pooey ideas. Led Califordia have id, sure, okay, bud nod de whole coundry."

The California pension vote had no meaning whatsoever, according to the lean man with the active Adam-apple. "The human factor's what I'm interested in," said he, brisk and cheerful. "Some people can't stand prosperity.

"Take that woman in Chicago, the radio girl; happy, successful, everything she wanted. When she got this big inheritance, though, her husband wasn't good enough for her. Had to find herself a pretty young gigolo. It serves her—"

"He broke off. "Did you say something, mister?"

"No," said Thomas Harwood harshly. "I didn't say a word."

The frustrated bridge player maintained that if they were going to pay out any pensions at all they ought to make it a thousand a week, like that kid from Michigan got. Yes, sir!

And make it payable at forty-five—with a chuckle and a wink—when a man was old enough to have some sense and still young enough to enjoy a little freedom.

"How's that for an idea, brother?" he said to the man beside him.

His companion leaned and spat carefully. "We don't worry our heads about that," he said. "We'll have Texas Jack in the White House this time next year and he'll know how to handle it."

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AT THIS point the radio voice of a newscaster commandeered the conversation. General conditions in Europe and the Orient were unchanged, they learned. The commodities markets were unsettled, the securities exchanges weaker at the close. A fire of unknown origin had destroyed a pavilion at the World's Fair.

"And now a bulletin from our Washington bureau," said the voice. "The special train bearing the mammoth petition for the passage of the Wheelock Bill will arrive in the nation's capitol one week from tomorrow. Plans for a mammoth parade and demonstration by pension advocates have been abandoned however, in view of the strenuous objections raised by the District of Columbia police. The attitude of the President toward such a stringent police decree has not been made known.

"Chicago: The Windy City will have to wait another sixty days at least to learn the inside story of the shooting of Veronica Vine, night club chanteuse. Attorneys for Alexander Perrin, the singer's husband, today hinted that Roy Chandler, the other man in the case, might repudiate his previous testimony. Sensational developments are promised when—"

"You're turning in early," said the briar pipe to Harwood. "You going straight through on the main line?"

"I'm branching off tomorrow," the lawyer said. "To Wade City, wherever that is."

"Wade City? Why I've got a cousin lives right outside of there. A right smart little town, they say. I've read some of the booklets their Chamber of Commerce puts out, and the boys down there have got plenty of go-ahead."

"Say, you two," called the hardware drummer, "how about a little poker then? Quarter limit, say."

Harwood pleaded a headache and retreated to his own Pullman. He composed the beginnings of at least eight letters to Susan Galway, destroyed each one, and expressed his opinion of life in general by inflicting a thumping kick on the side of his suitcase.

Before he switched off the light in his section he reread the telegram which had launched him on this latest journey:

W. C. BADGER ATTORNEY WADE CITY ADVISES GERARD CHARLES STONER DECEASED RESIDENT THAT CITY TWENTY YEARS. SON SAME NAME SOLE LEGATEE NOW EMPLOYED LOCAL GARAGE. SHALL WE HANDLE FROM THIS END? PLEASE ADVISE.

Harwood folded the blue-and-white sheet. He said, "Well Gerard Charles Stoner, whoever you are, I hope the legacy I'm bringing you means better luck than she found, God rest her."

WADE CITY, according to the leaflet issued by the Chamber of Commerce, is primarily a community of peaceful homes.

Situated in the lush and verdant Blue Hill Valley, watered by deep natural springs and the flow of Blue Hill River, blessed with an equable climate, its rich acres are a garden spot for agriculture of every sort.

Here too commerce and industry flourish apace. The improvement of transportation facilities during recent years has resulted in an increase in population to nine thousand souls who enjoy the best schools, the finest churches, the most advanced civic conveniences in the entire state.

To the stranger's eye however, Wade City will be reminiscent of a thousand other small quiet towns with

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neat frame houses and tree-shaded streets that doze in the spring sun. The business section, eight blocks in extent, might be a transplantation from Rockland, Me. or Petaluma, Cal.

Beginning at the River Fuel Supply it rises by easy stages to Huttick's Dry Goods and the six-story eminence of the Commercial Building and dwindles again to the flatness of Cartmell's Garage at the end of the new paving—where Jerry Stoner had been at work since seven of the bright morning.

Supine beneath a victoria coupé, late 1932 model, he devoted his hands and brain to the axle housing and his lips to a cheerful whistle. His tune, *Madelon.*

Intent on his tinkering he did not hear the first hail from the front part of the long low building. A few moments later an angry voice was shouting down. He turned his head and saw striped flannel legs and buckskin sport shoes.

"Oh hello, Mr. Cartmell." He propelled his dolly into the open and surveyed his employer from the ease of his spine. "You want me?"

"Are you deaf?" Mr. Cartmell inquired briskly. "Can't you hear them blowing the horn out there? Customers—they want to buy something that we want to sell."

"Where's the office girl? Where's Benny?"

"How do I know where Benny is? Do you want me to be trotting out to polish their windows myself?" Mr. Cartmell almost had to trot to keep pace with Jerry's strides. "Besides I told you I don't want you fooling with those old cars of yours while you're on duty. How many times do I have to say a thing to get it through your thick skull?"

"But I'm out to lunch now, Mr. Cartmell," Jerry said over his shoulder. "I only work on my own time."

He attended the wants of the impatient customer and returned to the office to explain to Mr. Cartmell about the coupé. He wanted to point out that he didn't even use the company tools on a personal job.

But Mr. Cartmell was in no mood for explanations. "It's the same way at the gas stations," he complained. "I don't know what would happen to my business if I wasn't on the job every minute watching you fellows. Got your minds on everything except your work."

"I wanted to have her in shape by this evening," Jerry said. "I've fixed it up to get a real good trade-in on that roadster I want."

"Roadsters," said Mr. Cartmell sourly. "Buying houses, getting married, wanting your salary raised. When I was your age I was mighty pleased if I had the use of a horse and the buggy every other Sunday."

"Oh, Vergie and me won't be getting married for a couple of years," Jerry said. "We won't have the money saved. And I'm picking up that roadster for a song."

THE wall telephone pealed its summons and Mr. Cartmell lifted the receiver. "For you," he said darkly. "If it isn't one way of wasting the boss' time it's another."

Jerry said, "Oh hello—hello, Mr. Badger. . . . Well, I—hold the wire . . . He wants me to come down to his office," he said to Mr. Cartmell. "How soon will Benny be back?"

"Give me the phone," said Mr. Cartmell brusquely. "Hello, Badger. What do you think we're running down here? What do—"

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The sharp edge of his voice was dulled. "You don't say! From New York, huh?. . . . No no, I won't say a thing. You have any idea of the . . . Ummmmm. Yes, of course. Certainly, Badger. I'll send him right down."

"It isn't any trouble is it, Mr. Cartmell?" Jerry asked. "It isn't that fight at the dance, is it? Those Eastville fellows started it, honest."

"As a matter of fact, Jerry my boy," said his employer, "I happened to be going down to see Badger myself on a little business. Go ahead and get washed up there. Get your coat." He chuckled. "I guess it won't break us if the place is locked for fifteen minutes until Benny gets back."

"It isn't about the lot, is it?" Jerry inquired as he came back, face shining. "I been making my payments every month."

"Just some detail about your father's estate," Mr. Cartmell assured. "Don't you worry, boy; I'll see it's fixed all right."

Jerry accommodated his stride to Mr. Cartmell's more leisured pace as they went along Market Street. A public stroll with Wade City's leading citizen — President of the School Board, Chairman of the County Committee, Past Master or Exalted Poobah of every civic and fraternal group in town— was something of an occasion for a young fellow just turned twenty-five.

It was mild exhiliration to be practically included in the greetings of Fisk Watson, postmaster and M. Pearlman, merchant, and to acknowledge with a nod the horn-toot of Mr. Arlington Dowst of the State Bank who idled past in his brand new Falcon eight.

Jerry gave a flit of his hand to the congregation outside the Palace Pool Hall and thought of the jibes that would greet him tonight when he dropped in after work. He said, "That new Falcon is a honey this year, isn't it, Mr. Cartmell?"

"A fine car, my boy. . . . Afternoon, Barton."

Jerry said "Hi!" to Barton Hay, eying the fawn-colored slacks and fuzzy jacket and the casual elegance of the silk scarf at the throat.

Everybody in town had admitted, during the high school days, that Jerry Stoner at tackle played more football in a day than Barton Hay could in a week of Sundays. If Jerry hadn't wrecked that knee, they said, he could have been a regular at Dallas or LSU or Duke or anywhere.

"Excuse me just a minute, Mr. Cartmell," Jerry said. "I want to run in here."

He opened the door of the barber shop and stuck his head inside. Jim West, at the second chair, was shaving a drummer from the hotel next door. "Vergie said she might call the garage around one o'clock, Mr. West," Jerry said, "but I got to go down the street here with Mr. Cartmell. Will you tell her I'll be over around eight?"

"That won't be much of a surprise will it, Jerry?" said Mr. West, grinning. "Sure I'll tell her."

CHAPTER XII

LAMB FOR SHEARING

WILL BADGER'S law suite was on the third floor of the Commercial Building, and Jerry thought that Gracie Huggings, the stenographer, gave him a funny look when he said hello. He winked at her as he followed Mr. Cartmell into the private office.

To his surprise Will Badger shook his hand warmly. He introduced a man

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named Harwood, a well-dressed fellow with a good pair of shoulders and a grip almost as strong as Jerry's own.

This Harwood had questions to ask and Jerry answered readily, with Will Badger and Mr. Cartmell supplying what information about his father that Jerry didn't happen to know.

The whole thing didn't take long. In not much more than an hour Jerry Stoner found himself in Will Badger's chair, a fountain pen in his fist and a scatter of papers on the desk before him.

All he had to do was sign his name to become a millionaire!

Jerry Stoner was excited of course, but no more so than any fellow would be. It was the same sort of feeling you had when you played a combination on the eight ball and your own ball and sank them both in a triple-header Kelly game. Or suppose you blocked a punt in the Rose Bowl and recovered in the end zone.

There was an emptiness in your stomach and a pleasant tingling ringing sound right above your ears. You shook hands with people and grinned and didn't know quite what you were saying. You weren't nearly as steamed up about it as Mr. Cartmell and Will Badger seemed to be.

"We have discovered there's considerable publicity when the news of such a windfall is released," this Mr. Harwood said. "You gentlemen know local conditions and can handle that as you choose. I will be at the hotel over tomorrow for any confirmation detail.

"If you'll excuse me now though, I think I'll try to get some sleep. The train—I hardly closed my eyes. Tell your newspapers I'll be available tomorrow morning."

He gripped Jerry's hand again. "Congratulations, Stoner, and the best of luck. If there are any other questions, if I can be of help—"

"Thanks, Mr. Harwood," Jerry said. "I—holy smoke, I don't know what to say."

Will Badger escorted Harwood on his way and was heard to tell Grace Huggings he'd be tied up all afternoon. He couldn't see anybody, wouldn't answer phone calls—no, not even Mrs. Badger. He fastened the latch of his door.

"No no, Jerry, keep your seat," he said. "I'll take this chair right here. We've got to figure out what we're going to do about this."

"He was mighty careful not to mention exact amounts," Mr. Cartmell said, "but the total's bound to be big—maybe half a million. These New York bigwigs wouldn't trail away down here for anything much less."

"A thousand a week for even five years—" Will Badger fingered the lobe of his ear. "Why the boy's a millionaire. It's better than the income a million would bring these days. Why Jerry, you're one of the richest men—ahem, excuse me—it's a big responsibility, my boy. Have you any notion what you'll do?"

Jerry swallowed. "Maybe I'd better be getting on back, Mr. Cartmell. Benny can't handle that truck job all alone. Besides Pete Wilmot's bringing that roadster around. I got to be there—"

A lift of Mr. Cartmell's brow silenced him. "It's up to us to figure it out for the boy, Will," he said. "Old friends of his father's like we are—"

"That's my idea exactly," the lawyer agreed. "What's in your mind, Sam?"

JERRY'S employer cleared his throat. "The way I see it, Jerry," he de-

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clared in his best platform voice, "is that waiting a few hours before we spread the news of this can't do a bit of harm. It will give you a chance to think, lad. You can have your plans made. It'll fix things so this New York fellow, this Harwood, can give out the details and handle things legally like he said."

"Well sure, sure," Jerry agreed. "That's right, Mr. Cartmell."

"You don't want to have every tomfool in town pawing you over and borrowing your money before you've hardly got it," Will Badger advised. "Why there'll be newspaper people here from as far as the capitol, taking pictures and nosing into your private affairs. You want to be all set for them, son, that's what I say."

Jerry nodded. "I don't want to have to go through all that."

"Well now, what do you think of this, Will?" Mr. Cartmell asked. "Suppose you and me and Jerry went someplace where we could relax and be comfortable and talk things over. Suppose we go out to my house, say, and get together where we can't be disturbed. Just hand me that phone a minute, Will. I can have the car here in no time."

"But gosh, Mr. Cartmell," Jerry said, "I don't want to bother—"

"That you, Joyce?" said Mr. Cartmell when he had his connection. "Tell your mother I'm bringing some men home in a few minutes. We'll use the library and we don't want to be pestered. And I want you to bring the car right over here to the Commercial Building. . . . Now now, I don't care who you've got to meet. You get that car right over here."

"But hadn't I—" Jerry hesitated. "I could go on over to the room and change my clothes."

"The clothes don't make the man," Will Badger chuckled. "If I had shoulders and a figure like yours, Jerry, I wouldn't mind being seen in one of those Tarzan suits."

"Lot of nonsense," Mr. Cartmell scoffed, "the way some of these young dandies dress these days. It's what a man's got in his head not what he puts on his back, I always say."

"Uh—about these checks." Jerry fingered them. "I'd appreciate it, Mr. Badger, if you'd hold on to them for me. I—well, I'd feel much safer that way."

The lawyer was happy to oblige.

In the outer office Jerry received another strange look from Grace Huggings as her employer announced he would be gone for the day. Instead of taking the elevator they mysteriously descended the rear stairs, and Will Badger escorted the embryonic Croesus across the walk to the Cartmell limousine with the solicitude of an Eagle Scout for the tender elbow of an aged lady.

"Uh—look," Jerry said, "I thought —well, maybe we could stop by the school and I—"

"Certainly, certainly," said Mr. Cartmell, "Get right in, Jerry." He seated himself beside his youngest mechanic and made room for Mr. Badger. "You can tell Vergie if you like. Naturally you'll want to let her know before any of the rest. At the same time—"

"She wouldn't breathe a word, Mr. Cartmell. You don't know Vergie."

"The fewer the better's my advice," Will Badger said. "How long could she keep a thing like this from Jim West? And once Jim got his long jaw working—"

"Well anyway," Jerry conceded, "I could just drop in and say hello."

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JOYCE CARTMELL had ignored them completely. She sat stiffly with chin tilted, eyes fixed firmly forward, her hands gripping hard on the wheel.

"Well," her father demanded. "Are we anchored here all day?"

A shoulder wiggled. "How can a person drive anyone if she doesn't know where he wishes to go?"

"And you could at least speak to people," said her father. "You know Jerry here, don't you?"

"I ought to. He's changed my tires often enough."

"Drive out by the Mill Road, honey," Will Badger said soothingly. "It's prettier that way. Prettiest country in the whole doggone state if I know anything about it. Wouldn't you say so, Jerry?"

"Yes sir, it's mighty nice."

Joyce had one of her mads on. You could tell by the way she drove. A long while back—it was in junior year—Joyce had quite a crush on Jerry Stoner. He'd taken her to six straight dances and no telling how serious it might have been if they hadn't sent her away to that big girl's school the next fall.

Jerry hadn't seen much of her in the three-four years she'd been back but he still remembered that spitfire temper she had. There'd been one time, on the class picnic. . . .

"Now take that section yonder," Will Badger was saying. "There's a piece of property I happen to know can be picked up dirt cheap. You'd put the house up there on that rise and grade the lawn right on down. It might not be such a show place as yours, Sam, but any man would be proud to own it, eh Jerry?"

Jerry nodded. "Our lot's over towards the river. That's a nice section."

"A nice section for some," the lawyer chuckled, "but for a young fellow with prospects—hehhehheh."

"Yeah," Jerry admitted, "it is pretty small."

With professional detachment he had been testing the comfort of the limousine. That dashboard array of gauges and meters, for instance, was something he'd always wanted on a car of his own. He leaned back against the cushions, shifting his position, and found ease without any flabby oversoftness. Material and workmanship put a firm strength beneath you—like riding on a tiger, he thought.

Even when Joyce hit a curve too sharp the steady flow of power from the engine smoothed what should have been a jerk into an almost imperceptible sway.

"This is some buggy, Mr. Cartmell," he said. "They sure build these from the ground up, don't they?"

Mr. Cartmell conceded the limousine was satisfactory even if it did gobble the gas. "Personally," he said, "a smaller car would suit me fine. At the same time a man in my position, being in the business and all, has sort of got to set the style. Like Lydia says—that's Mrs. Cartmell, Jerry—I wouldn't want to parade around town in my overalls."

Jerry could see the logic of that. And, as Will Badger pointed out, he could realize that the best is usually cheaper in the long run.

GRAVEL flew as Joyce turned into the Cartmell drive. Yes sir, she sure was burned up about something. If this was his car, Jerry thought, he would give her a few pointers about over-shifting and taking those turns in such a rush. She jammed on the

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brakes in front of the house and made the tires squeal. Her father scowled at the back of her head as he got out.

"You and Jerry go on into the library, Will," he said. "I'll be right along."

Jerry rubbed his hands on his pants and cocked an eye up at the colonial pillars of the Cartmell residence. He hadn't realized before how tall and graceful they would be when seen close up.

He remembered coming out here when some cattle millionaire was building the place but that was in the days before this section had been built much. The kids played around in the woods on the other side of the river now.

"Right here's a fine example of the sort of thing I meant," Will Badger whispered in the hallway. "I happen to know Sam picked up this place for a song when that Panhandle fellow went broke. Up to then Sam was just another business man around town; but in less than a year's time folks were beginning to sit up and take some notice.

"Like I've said many a time, a man needn't be a genius to be a success. All he's got to do is use the common ordinary horse-sense God gave him—That, and knowing the right people."

The library faced a wide veranda and there were tall windows to let in the sun. It was a big easy room, a man's room, and governors and senators and other visiting notables had smoked their fat cigars here.

Jerry Stoner was aware of the shine at the knees of his pants as he sat down. It would take a week at least, he estimated, to scour the grease stains from under his nails.

"I was supposed to see Pete Wilmot about that roadster of his this afternoon," he said. "We kind of had a trade fixed up. He can't hold me to anything, can he Mr. Badger, if we didn't have any papers signed?"

The lawyer smiled. "Not if I know the law. A woman's not the only one who's allowed to change her mind."

"I was thinking maybe a new car would be better," Jerry said. "Those new Chevvies only run around six hundred and they say they're mighty easy on the gas."

"Woman's Club," muttered Mr. Cartmell, bustling in. "It's plenty warm enough to set up their bridge tables outside. They can gossip and renege just as good without scattering their ashes all over the rugs and spilling their cocktails on my leather bindings. A man ought to have one room where he's safe from powder and lipstick and perfumery."

He fastened the latch of the door and gave them a wink. From a cabinet he produced a decanter and glasses. "Jerry, my boy, here's to you," he toasted.

"To your good luck and success," Will Badger said.

The straight Bourbon made a tingling warmth glow beneath your belt, and the second drink was a pleasant cushion to rest against. The third went down so smooth and mellow that you knew you could never drink that rotgut with the bunch down at the pool hall again.

THEY talked in the bright afternoon. Mr. Cartmell became "Sam" and Will Badger was a fellow as comfortable and easy as an old shoe. Jerry had never known how intimate these men and his father had been in the old days, but it certainly was a lucky thing.

Here he was, young and inexperienced, suddenly saddled with responsibilities he would never have been able to handle alone. Bonds, investments,

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mortgages, tax liens—why all those things were Greek to him. Those slick promoters and glib salesmen might have robbed him blind.

But here was Sam Cartmell, the biggest man in town, and Will Badger, smartest lawyer in this part of the state, to guard and counsel and cherish the son and namesake of their dearest friend.

"The thing to do is keep your money right here at home," Sam said. "Put it in something sound and conservative. Invest it with people you can trust and in a business you know something about yourself."

"Exactly," said Friend Will. "Put it in something you can keep your finger on."

"That's how I've always done," said Brother Cartmell. "There's the garage and my filling stations—a steady, sensible, down-to-earth proposition I can keep my eye on every day. I'll admit it's quite a chore for a man my age to keep them running right but it's worth a man's trouble when the end of the week shows his profits as regular as a clock."

"Yes sir," Badger nodded. "Steady turnover, sure profits—better than money in the bank."

Jerry shook his head. "The only trouble is"—he paused frowning—"I don't know much about any business except in the auto line. I'm as good a mechanic as anybody in town, I guess, but outside of that—"

"You see, Sam!" Will Badger exclaimed. "I told you the boy had a noodle on him. Hits the whole thing right on the nose the first crack out of the box."

"Ahem—er—exactly how do you men, Will?"

Will Badger chuckled. "A lawyer's trained to see both sides of things. Now here's you, Sam, with a fine steady business that's getting to be a little too much for a man of your years to handle. Here's Jerry, young and ambitious and trained in the same line, stymied by the fact that Wade City's not big enough to support a newcomer in the same field. It's plain to my mind—"

"Whoa now, Will! Who said I'd want to sell?"

"Gosh, Mr. Badger, I wasn't trying to hint—"

The oblongs of sunlight marched deeper into the room as they talked, polishing chairs and shining the rugs, and Jerry Stoner could feel his stature growing taller with them and the new pattern of his life sharing their brightness. It was as easy to talk about big business and important things, he found, as to discuss football or fishing or camshafts at the barber shop.

Common sense was all you needed. With two sensible, hard-headed men of affairs like Sam Cartmell and Will Badger to point out the advantages of this and the pitfalls of that it wasn't too difficult to work out a solution to Jerry's problem. In the end they evolved the perfect set-up.

The lawyer would handle all his financial matters under a trust arrangement they would work out with the bank. The details of this were not very clear to Jerry, but the important thing was that he wouldn't have to bother his head about taxes and investments and loans and all that. When sharpers came around with their wildcat schemes he would refer them to Will Badger who would tell them what was what.

Also—and this was something bigger still—Sam Cartmell had as good as agreed to sell a three-quarter share of his business, his filling stations and

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his downtown agency as well as the garage, to the young man who had started the morning as an ordinary workaday mechanic.

From wrench and overalls, in less than six hours, to a partnership with the biggest man in town!

CHAPTER XIII

RIDING THE CUSHIONS

THEY shook hands all around and Jerry's smile was the widest of three. He had an exultation now that was a greater thrill even than that New York fellow's announcement of his windfall.

This was something real and solid, something you could get a grip on. It was a place in life, work to do a future serene and secure.

"Honest," he said, "I don't know how I'll ever be able to thank you."

Will Badger massaged his squeezed knuckles. "I'll draw up the papers first thing in the morning. When it's all arranged we'll find this Mr. Harwood and let him give the news out. Looks like you've got a big day coming, Jerry old boy."

"I've been thinking about that too," said Mr. Cartmell. "You got any ideas about that, son, any personal plans?"

"Well, I—" Jerry glanced at the clock on the desk. "I sort of got a date tonight. We were going to the dance. Tomorrow, why—uh—"

His erstwhile employer and partner-to-be eyed him gravely. "Any young fellow in business," he said; "will find that his biggest asset or liability will be the people he knows and the company he keeps. Now if you want to mix around town tomorrow with every, Tom, Dick and Harry shaking hands and hollering nonsense and expecting you to buy them drinks—well, I guess there's no real harm in it. If I was in your boots, though—"

"I see what you mean, Sam," said Will Badger quickly. "You're right, dead right."

"I was going to suggest, Jerry, that you stay right here and have dinner with us. A lot of the big men in town will be interested in such a stroke of luck happening to a local boy. I might even invite a few of 'em over."

"Splendid, Sam, splendid," the lawyer applauded. "A fine idea."

Jerry frowned at his shiny knees. "But I—well, you see I ought to let Vergie knew and they haven't got a phone."

Mrs. Cartmell opened the door and peeped coyly in. "They're gone now, Sam. We thought you men might join us for a cocktail in the living room."

Will Badger smiled and bowed. "To the ladies, God bless 'em."

"We'll be right along," her husband said. "Oh—uh—you remember Jerry Stoner, Lydia?"

Mrs. Cartmell wore a pince-nez and showed a lot of teeth when she smiled. "Of course I do. You've spoken about Jerry often enough, goodness knows."

Jerry released her fingers quickly. His previous acquaintance with the lady had been confined to a few brief but spirited telephonic skirmishes on the subject of minor motor repairs that must be instantly performed, and he was surprised to find she had a second voice without a chill and a rasp in it. He followed her down the hall.

Joyce sat with a tall dark girl in the many-windowed living room. She waved her hand and called, "Hello there!" as friendly as you please. "This is Helen Flint, my guest—Jerry Stoner, Mr. Badger. . . . Come on over, Jerry, and tell us what makes the world go round."

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HE BALANCED a Martini and smoked an unaccustomed cigarette. The dark girl was from New Orleans, and good looking, too, but she wasn't as pretty as Joyce by a long shot. Joyce wore her hair different these days and had lost her freckles; but she still had that way of looking at you with her head to one side and her eyes saying that she knew something she wouldn't tell.

They talked about swing bands and football and college proms.

"Have you seen our new terrace, the pride of the Cartmells?" Joyce asked. "Come on and have a look."

She took Jerry's arm as they stepped through the french windows. "I see you've rubbed the warpaint off," he said. "You sure were burned up this afternoon."

"Oh, it's Mother. We had a tennis date with Barton Hay and the rest of the crowd and at the last minute she insisted she needed us here for her bridge. She treats me like a handyman about the place, running errands, chauffeuring—"

"If my chauffeur handled a car like you do," Jerry said, "I'd carry plenty of insurance. How many times a week do you strip the gears?"

She smiled. "What do you charge per hour for private lessons, sir? And what are all these mysterious rumors I hear about Mr. Gerard C. Stoner? Did you really inherit a lot of money, Jerry?"

"There you are," called Mrs. Cartmell. "Sam tells me you're having dinner with us, Jerry, and I just wanted to explain that we really must go to the club. I've already made the arrangements, just a little something for Helen Flint, you know. You don't mind the Country Club do you, Jerry? It's very pleasant there and you youngsters can dance later if you want." She smiled.

He found words with difficulty. "Gosh, Mrs. Cartmell. I really—that is—"

"Oh yes," she said, "your clothes. Sam thought of that. There's a whole wardrobe of Junior's things upstairs and you could save yourself the long drive down to change. He's about your same size, I believe. We're not at all dressy at the club, Jerry. Anything comfortable, sports things. Just go upstairs and help yourself."

She gave him the beam of her pinc-nez and the perfect-hostess smile and was gone before his mutterings became coherent. He turned his bewilderment to Joyce.

"I'll bet you find plenty of slack in the seat of Sammy's pants," she said. "He's getting fatter every year. Hey, what's wrong?"

"It's only—" Jerry shrugged. "I guess I could call Jim West down at the shop. We were going to the dance at Cottonwoods, that's all."

"You never used to notice Vergie in high school," she said. "Is she still teaching? Are you two really engaged?"

"Well"—he changed his frown to a grin— "I guess it will be all right. This is kind of a special occasion. Something like this doesn't happen every day."

"Was it an inheritance, Jerry? Was that lawyer really from New York? No fooling, how much will it be?"

"You ask your father," he said. "Ask him about his new partner too. Do you think I can wear Sammy's things okay?"

"I'll show you the room." She held out her hand, the cool and slender fingers. "Honest, Jerry, I'm awfully glad about your good luck. I guess you ought to know that. And if it's any

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consolation, you're not the only one who's breaking a date tonight. We promised to sneak off after dinner and Barton will be furious."

Will Badger appeared at the window with a cockney butler's accent and more Martinis on a tray. He told the same jokes that were current at the pool hall but they were somehow wiser and wittier against the background here. Mrs. Cartmell pretended to be mildly scandalized.

IT WAS a pleasant, merry, thrilling day. A day to remember all your life, Jerry Stoner thought as the shower needled warm on his back; and best of all it was only the beginning.

Luck, fate, whatever you call it, had touched the calendar of Jerry Stoner's future with a Midas finger. Before him was a vista of the easy golden hours yet to come. The dreams he hadn't dared to dream could all be realities now.

"Like the Count of Monte Cristo," he said, and even the coldest spray in the shower couldn't cool the tingle that ran in his veins.

He helped himself to young Sam Cartmell's underwear and didn't envy Sammy the education and the polish and whatever it was you acquired back East at Yale. He didn't envy a single soul alive.

He was young and strong and healthy and had as much brains as the average man. He would have money enough for his needs all his life, and friends and a place to grow in. Whatever would come he would find a way to handle.

When he had scraped the stubble from his chin and scrubbed his nails for the fifth time he selected what he would wear. Sammy's extra clothes, the surplus he didn't need at college, would have been an elegant wardrobe to yesterday's Jerry Stoner. Now he grinned at the array.

The clothes he would buy, he decided, would be the best: the kind you had to look at twice to see how good they were. Yes, and a complete outfit of everything too. If you bought your suits four or six at a time, they claimed you really got the wear from them.

The trousers he chose were too ample at the waist but the brown sports jacket fitted fine. His old brown shoes might not look so hot but the mirror told him that otherwise he was okay.

He smiled at his broad-shouldered image. "Jerry the well-dressed man."

"I knew they'd fit," said Mrs. Cartmell when he went downstairs. "Why Jerry, you're absolutely handsome."

"The big blond brute in person," said Helen Flint. "If I'm a nice quiet guest, Mr. Stoner, may I have the first gavotte?"

Jerry laughed with the rest. He was pleased when Joyce insisted she wouldn't think of driving with an expert in the crowd. With the big wheel in his hands and all that power at the touch of his toe—gosh, it was just like running on air. The wind was cool on his cheek and Joyce was a soft perfume that touched his shoulder. He had never enjoyed a drive so much.

It wasn't until they were crossing the lobby of the Country Club and he saw the time that he remembered he hadn't phoned Jim West. By then it was too late to matter.

THE Country Club had been built about three years ago, and the editorials in the *Weekly Liberal* said it was the headquarters of Wade City's Cliveden Set and ought to be burned to the ground.

Jerry couldn't see anything so ultra

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snooty about it, but it was kind of funny to catch the eye of a couple of the fellows you knew around town and have them look away just because they happened to be working here in monkey suits.

"There's our table in the corner," Sam Cartmell said. "I guess we're a little late."

It was a table for twelve and screens gave it a semi-privacy. Arlington Dowst was there with his wife, a pretty little woman. Mr. and Mrs. Ellis Hopper—he was the big realtor—were also introduced, and Major Harrison Hay himself arrived a moment later. Harrison Hay had been mayor of Wade City five times and was still the Mr. Big in local politics.

He frowned at Jerry with judicial white brows but gripped his hand with professional warmth. "Yes, of course, knew your father. . . . What's all this you've got up your sleeve tonight, Sam?"

"Just a little get-together, Major, that's all. Here Jerry, sit right here, and if Madeline Dowst starts talking about books and literature you just turn your deaf ear to her."

She talked about babies instead and was veering off on the subject of family connections when the waiter came with the wine.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "Champagne!"

"Sam, you old fox," boomed Major Hay, "what deviltry are you hatching?"

Mr. Cartmell rose. "Friends," he said, "we have with us tonight a young man whose father most of us knew. In this whole town I don't believe you could find a more honest, steadier, harder-working youngster. If Dame Fortune had to smile on somebody I don't know where she could've found a fellow worthier than my young friend, Jerry Stoner."

They stared at Jerry and a buzz of sound went around the table. He could feel the flush rising in his cheeks and when Joyce winked across at him he turned his eyes and his stiff smile down to the tablecloth.

"What do you mean, Sam?" said Ellis Hopper. "What's happened?"

"It's not my secret, friends," Mr. Cartmell lifted his hand, "but since the news will soon be common property I can't see the harm in telling you that Jerry has come into a fortune that will make him one of the wealthiest men in town. So here's to Jerry Stoner, folks: to his happiness and success."

Jerry drank his first glass of champagne in such a gulp he hardly tasted it. The ladies beamed at him and the men came around to shake his hand and clap him on the shoulder.

Will Badger was explaining the details and everybody was talking all at once. The questions came so thick and fast that Jerry couldn't begin to answer them.

It was confusing and exciting but Jerry didn't mind it much after the first flurry was over. He said "Yes" and "No" and "Thank you very much" and did a lot of grinning. He drank some more champagne—dry and insipid stuff, he thought—and ate what he could whenever the chance offered.

Everybody was very friendly and pleasant, the way you'd expect people to be. Major Hay said to call on him any time for advice or help and invited him out to dinner. Arlington Dowst put the services and resources of the State Bank at his disposal and suggested luncheon early next week. Ellis Hopper had a car he could use until he got things straightened around.

Someone suggested coffee in the

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lounge, and Joyce and Helen Flint rescued him then. He came into the room where the dancing was with a pretty girl on either arm, all three laughing, and he could see the way people looked at them and wondered who he was.

Joyce and Helen pretended to squabble about who was entitled to the first dance.

"Let's all go have a drink at the bar instead," Joyce said.

"Sign Daddy's name to the check," she whispered as they went along. "He told me to tell you."

THE bar was the hangout of the younger set, the college crowd. They sat at a table with tiny thimbles of brandy and Joyce was waving to all the people she knew.

There were fellows here that Jerry hadn't seen three times in the last three years, whose names he couldn't recall, and girls who were wearing short skirts and pigtails when he was in school all grown up now in their fluffy dresses and puffing cigarettes.

They all seemed to remember him, though, when they gathered around.

"What's all this we've been hearing, Jerry?" asked Bernie Pearlman (USC '36). "They say you've got a mortgage on the mint."

"You mean just like those people in the papers?" cried Lucille Huttick. "A thousand dollars *every* week? I ought to kiss you for luck, you lucky dog!"

And she did amid laughter, setting the style. Pretty soon there were five or six tables pushed together and everybody having a time. Joyce scrubbed lipstick from Jerry's face while they were dancing. He danced with Helen Flint and the little Cape-heart girl.

"I waltzed with you at the football prom," she said. "You were captain of the team and I was just a kid."

He nodded. "That's six—no, five years ago."

"Are you really getting an imported roadster—a Rolls-Royce like they say?"

"They're the best you can buy," he said, "and the best is cheapest in the long run."

The fellows downtown used to put a hand on hip and pretend to wear a monocle when they talked about the parties at the Country Club; but that was just a lot of sour grapes as far as Jerry could see.

You didn't have to wear baggy pants and a windbreaker to be a regular guy. There's no law against good clothes and decent manners and the drink that the waiter brings you in a glass has the same effect as the drink swigged in darkness from the bottle.

Will Badger and Major Hay and three or four more led him back to the bar. They were all pleasantly primed and kept kidding him about the lipstick smudges.

"Just a lady-killer, that's all," Will Badger said. "Maybe you'll head for Hollywood, Jerry, and show those fellows how it's done."

"Knew his father before him," rumbled Major Hay. "Old John—that is, Charley—knew him twenny years."

"I understand you're building," said Fred Sarsfield, contractor. "That property out near Sam's is certainly a fine piece. Be worth three times the price in another five years. You expect to start construction soon?"

Jerry didn't exactly know but it wouldn't be long he guessed.

He danced with Joyce a third time and the music was a song he liked, *Follow Your Heart*. Her head came to his chin. She had never liked to talk

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while dancing, he remembered, and when they were near an exit she said, "My lungs are famished. How about some air?"

They crossed the drive and went along the little walk to the putting green. The night was clear and soft and there was a crescent moon.

She said, "You dance just like you used to."

"I'm not much on jive," he said.

"It wasn't so long ago, was it Jerry? I never did want to go to Baltimore to school. It was all Mother's doing."

"Maybe I'd have gone on too," he said, "if I hadn't ruined my knee."

"Look Jerry, Helen said I was practically throwing myself at you. Do you think I am? I mean, after all we used to be good friends. It isn't as if—"

"Gosh no, Joyce. Your father and I being partners and all, it's only natural."

She held his arm as they went back. They were dancing in a remote corner of the big room, moving slowly across and back, when Barton Hay cut in with a slap on the shoulder.

"Do you mind, Sammy?" He feigned surprise when Jerry turned. "Oops, sorry old man! I thought I recognized the coat."

Jerry just grinned. He felt like bowing. If Barton Hay wanted to play that way—well, that was okay. He had a right to be sore but it would take more than a wisecrack to get Jerry Stoner's goat tonight.

As a matter of fact, he thought as he strolled outside again, Barton had hit it right. There was the whole thing in a nutshell: he'd been living a second-hand life. You wore cheap imitations of the luckier fellows' clothes, you drove the cars they discarded and lived in the shacks they had outgrown.

Hand-me-downs, second best—and you became so accustomed to taking the leavings that you mocked your betters because they traveled first-class.

But no more. Those days were done and Gerard Charles Stoner had put them behind. He'd been merely existing before. Now he'd begin to live. Like the book said, "Unless you get what you want out of life what's the use of living?" He remembered another saying and repeated it aloud: "I'm riding the cushions all the way."

CHAPTER XIV

BOY GETS DIPLOMA

HE was a little drunk, he realized, but his head was clear. The darkness was fresh on his face and when he clenched his fists and flexed his shoulders back his body knew a vast cool comfort.

He had come around to the rear of the clubhouse and was standing beneath a main-floor balcony. There were stars out beyond and he could have laughed at them.

Footsteps scraped above and he heard the voices distinctly:

"She's still dancing with Barton," a girl said. "I thought he had more pride than that. If I were in his place I'd never speak to her again."

"Joyce could always handle her men." It was Lucille Huttick speaking. "What I want to know is why she didn't buy her new flame a manicure and have the slack taken out of his pants before introducing him to her friends. Those big clumsy hands of his —ugh!"

"Yes, and the way he sits and grins like a big trained ape. Bernie Pearlman said they had to doctor the examinations to keep him eligible all through high school."

Jerry found a door at his back and

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pushed it open silently. Lucille Huttick had never liked him, he knew. He was in a dimly lighted locker room, and suddenly he wanted to douse his face in the coldest water he could find.

He was moving softly toward the forward light when voices halted him again. He stood back among the shadows, waiting.

"Jus' want you to taste it," said Major Harrison Hay's subdued growl. "I say it's the best Scotch you can buy." A squeal of hinge and clank of metal followed.

"So you couldn't find 'im anywhere around, huh? Well, small loss I say. My boy tells me he's nothing but one of those poolroom hoodlums."

"Maybe he's passed out somewhere," Ellis Hopper said. "He was pretty wobbly last I saw him. . . . This sure has a nice rich bouquet, Major. Well, here's how."

"Ummmmmm," said the Major. "Haaaah. Yes sir, Ellis, remember the name. Royal Ransom, and not expensive in case lots either."

"The only reason I wanted to see him before we go," the realtor said, "is that Indian Hill property. Will was hinting around we might unload that doggone white elephant on him before the new assessment goes through."

"Will's sharp," the Major agreed. "Like I told him, though, if Stoner's going to squander his money we may ash—we may as well get the benefit right here in town. You knew his father too, didn't you, Ellis? No good. A deadbeat if there ever was one. A mouthy radical. I was chairman when we ran him out of the lodge."

They went toward the stairway and Jerry followed them three swift paces, his face white and big fists clenched. The sound of descending footsteps made him pause again, breathing hard.

"So here you are," called Arlington Dowst. "Well boys, we all may as well give up. We're licked. Sam and Will Badger have already got him sewed up in a sack. A limited trust arrangement with Sweet William's hand on the purse strings."

Ellis Hopper whistled.

"And that's not all," the banker said. "You know what he's going to do first thing tomorrow? He's taking a three quarters share of Sam's business off his hands."

"That damned old fox!" roared Harrison Hay. "Why it's robbery! That boy will have him in court as soon as he gets wise."

The dapper banker chuckled. "Didn't you notice, Major, how the young idiot was mooning around Sam's girl? No, Sam's just born lucky, that's all. For the last five years he's had the City Council under his thumb as far as zoning regulations were concerned. He's had a practical monopoly on the gasoline trade.

"Now, with the Council sure to let down the bars at next month's meeting, he sells at a fancy price and lets the sucker buck the competition that's sure to come."

"Sam's a sly one," said Ellis Hopper, and the three went chuckling off together.

Jerry Stoner leaned against a locker, his hands dangling and all the strength gone out of them. His stomach constricted and he was sure he was going to be sick.

When he stood alone after a few moments his drinks hit him all at once and his walk was a slow weave. He put his hand on the railing and climbed the stairs. Somebody spoke to him as he went toward the music but he couldn't stop. He edged through the

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press of the dancers, ignoring their stares, and touched Joyce Cartinell's arm.

"Listen, Joyce—"

"Why Jerry!"

He said, a little hoarsely:

"Listen, I want you to tell your father—"

Barton Hay put the girl behind him. "See here, Stoner, the dance floor's no place for drunks. Go back to the gutter and sleep it off."

"I'm not drunk, Joyce," Jerry said. "I only wanted—"

"You big clown!" Barton Hay gritted. "Have I got to teach you your place?"

"Shut up," said Jerry. "Shut up, you Fancy Dan." He pushed Barton's chest, not hard, and as Barton lunged forward with his haymaker swinging Jerry stepped inside and his straight right traveled no more than twelve inches. The women began to squeak and scream as Barton Hay went down.

Jerry said, "You tell your father, Joyce—"

But she was backing away from him and her voice joining in with all the others. Somebody tried to grapple him from behind and Jerry had to execute a flying mare. Two or three more rushed up, Will Badger among them, and it was Gerard Charles Stoner's pleasure to give the lawyer one terrier shake before sending him spinning in the direction of the bandstand.

They stood away from him then. Nobody tried to touch him as he went across the hushed room with a fist swinging at each hip and his head in a slow sway of challenge to one or all. He was going down the steps outside before the orchestra leader could rally his music and storm the breach of the brawl.

Tiger Rag was the chosen tune.

JERRY went down the drive and none came after him. He walked along the highway without direction. There was a deadness in his body and a dizziness in his head and he didn't care. He walked, he walked, and all he knew was the slow trudge of his shoes.

Headlights came up and he turned to face them, instinctively lifting his arm. A light truck halted and a grimy face leaned out of the cab.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? Did the nasty bad tire go bang on the chauffeur's night off?"

"Step out," Jerry said. "The both of you step out and we'll see who's your sweetheart. Come on, step out."

"Why didn't you say you was regular?" the truckman growled. "Hop on if you're going to town."

Jerry rode as far as the square. It was two blocks over to Cherry Street and he walked it slowly. The house was dark but he knew what he had to do. He put his thumb on the buzzer and kept it there.

When somebody called from above he didn't answer. He buzzed until Jim West, a blanket around his shoulders, jerked the door wide. Jim was hopping mad.

"Now look here, Jerry," he exploded, "you can carry things too far. I don't give a hoot how big a mucky-muck you've become, you can't wake my household at this hour of the morning."

"I got to see Vergie," Jerry said. "I just got to, Mr. West."

"She's in bed and asleep long ago. She can't come down, you hear? Now get on home before we have a rumpus here."

"I got to see her, Mr. West. I won't go home till I do. I'm not drunk, honest. I just want to say something and go."

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"You want me to call the police, I reckon?"

"You can if you want. Don't try to close the door, Mr. West. I'm coming in. I don't want to hurt anybody, but—"

Jim West grinned. "I'm glad I'm not twenty years younger, Jerry, or I might be tempted to give you a rassle on that. Come on in, boy, and I'll try to coax her down. You kids do the doggone doggondest things!"

Vergie was already standing midway on the stair. She backed against the wall and pulled her robe tighter. In the faint light that came from above Jerry could hardly see her face.

"Don't think you can bully me," she said. "Go on back to all your fine new friends. Go back and smear more lipstick on."

"Now listen, honey, please—"

The shiver of her shoulders was in her voice. "I know. Gracie Huggings is telling some crazy story all over town. Well, I don't care if you did inherit five thousand dollars, or fifty-five. How do you think I felt with people asking me—"

He closed part of the gap with three hasty strides. "Please, Vergie, please don't cry. I just want to say I—"

"You and the Cartmells and the Country Club," she sobbed. "You never even thought to send me word."

He stood at the bottom of the stairs. His hurt and bewilderment and the wild dark anger had hardened a concrete block inside that weighted him there. The things he wanted to say were clogged in his brain and he had no words for them. He wet his lips and moved his awkward hands.

"Get back," she said. "Don't you dare to touch me, Jerry Stoner."

His eyes traveled down from her face to the red carpet and her slippered feet. "All right, Vergie, you don't have to say it. I know what I am. Just a big dumb grinning ape they said, and they're right. They showed me where I belong, and even if I'm not smart at lessons when I do learn something I don't forget it soon. If you'll only give me another chance—"

"No," she sobbed. "Stay back!"

THE tears were on her cheeks, her hands clenched at her throat; but she did not retreat from his tentative step. He raised his eyes to her face again, moving his arms in mute appeal, and with a sharp quick draw of breath she came to meet the embrace that lifted her and hid her weeping.

"Oh Jerry," she was sobbing, "you're just a baby. You're too good and decent and innocent for them, that's all."

"The grease is under my fingernails," he said thickly. "It's hard to clean. I'm just a dumb mechanic, honey, just a big dumb fool."

"You're not!" she cried. "You're sweet, Jerry. You're the sweetest, nicest, swellest fool!"

She clung to him and gradually then her sobbing ceased. There was only the sound of his murmuring.

"Say, you two," Jim West called, minutes later, "it's getting mighty chilly down here. It'll ruin my reputation with the neighbors as a chaperon but I'm gettin' back to bed."

Jerry stood up and carried her down the five steps in his arms. "There's something else we got to do," he said, "and you got to come along, Jim. You get on your clothes and we'll go and see this Mr. Harwood."

"But listen, boy, it's almost three o'clock!"

"It's important, Jim," said Jerry gravely. "It's the most important thing

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I've ever done. We—I—you just *got* to."

Tim West's exasperated look lasted only an instant. It changed to a thoughtful frown, and then to smiling.

. . . Thomas Harwood was awakened by a thumping on his door. There was sound of altercation in the hall as he shrugged into his robe.

The protestator, it soon developed, was the night clerk of the Commercial House who struggled against a big hand that held his collar firmly.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harwood," Jerry Stoner said, "but this is mighty serious. Can we see you for just a little while?"

"Of course you can. I've been sleeping since this afternoon and was ready to wake up anyway. What can I do for you, Mr. Stoner?"

"You see, Jed?" The restraining hand released the clerk. "I told you it was all right. It's your own fault we had all this bother."

"Come in," Harwood invited. "I—uh"—he shook off a yawn—"if you'll excuse me while I straighten up—"

"That's all right," said Jerry, closing the door upon the ruffled clerk. "This is Vergie West, Mr. Harwood, and Jim West, Vergie's father. It's that money of yours we came to see about."

"What about it?"

Jerry paused a moment frowning, as if he were planning what he would say. Then he began slowly:

"Well, you're a lawyer and another lawyer told me today that a man can't be held to anything unless there's been papers signed. Is that a fact? Suppose I said I'd do something and then found these fellows were practically crooks?"

"There's such a thing as a verbal contract, but generally speaking—no, I wouldn't worry about it if I were you."

"That's what I told you," said Jim West.

"I know, Jim, but I wanted to be sure. Another thing, Mr. Harwood, I didn't sign those checks but I left 'em with Will Badger and I want to get 'em back.

"Then I wish you'd help me fix things so the money can be put away safe where I can only get the interest on it. That's all we'll need. I'd like to have it arranged so we can't draw out a penny without two signatures, Vergie's and mine."

"A very simple matter," Harwood said, smiling. "And very wise too. Will this be a partnership or—er—a closer association?"

Jerry's arm went around the girl's shoulders and he held her close. "This has been a big night for me, Mr. Harwood," he said gravely, "and it's going to get bigger yet. From here we're going over and roust out old Mr. John-Tom Benson; he's county clerk. And we're heading straight from there to Judge McClintock's, no matter how late it is.

"That money of yours might have made a fool of me alone but maybe the both of us can find the way to handle it."

Then he was smiling, but not at Thomas Harwood; he was smiling down at the girl encircled by his big arm. And she nodded.

"Headstrong as a mule," grinned Jim West. "Well, Mr. Harwood, we won't keep you up any later."

"Hey, wait!" Thomas Harwood said. "I can climb into my clothes in two minutes. A daybreak wedding—why it's just the thing I need. And you'll want another witness to make it strictly legal."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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Detour, Mr. Darwin

By RICHARD WORMSER

Author of "Elephants to Ride Upon," "You're in the Circus Now," etc.

Fair Cottonville is not herself. The mayor's hiding in an ashcan and the citizens are underneath their beds, for two hundred antic apes are making mayhem, while McNally hoarsely screams a lullaby

I

WHEN he first got on the train in Kansas City, Dave McNally hoped no one would recognize him. It was a bore always to be asked for your autograph, to have little girls look at you wide-eyed and want to hear about your adventures in the jungle.

After he had killed his second highball in the crowded club car, he began to wonder what kind of dopes his fellow passengers were that they didn't know him. He wondered if Frank Buck, his only rival, would have passed unnoticed?

As he tinkled the ice in the bottom of the third glass, he decided that the girl in the cute little Scotch outfit ought to know who he was. He raised a finger for the porter.

The colored man scurried up the aisle with the peculiar shuffle of men who spend much time on fast trains. "Yas, suh, bourbon *and* soda."

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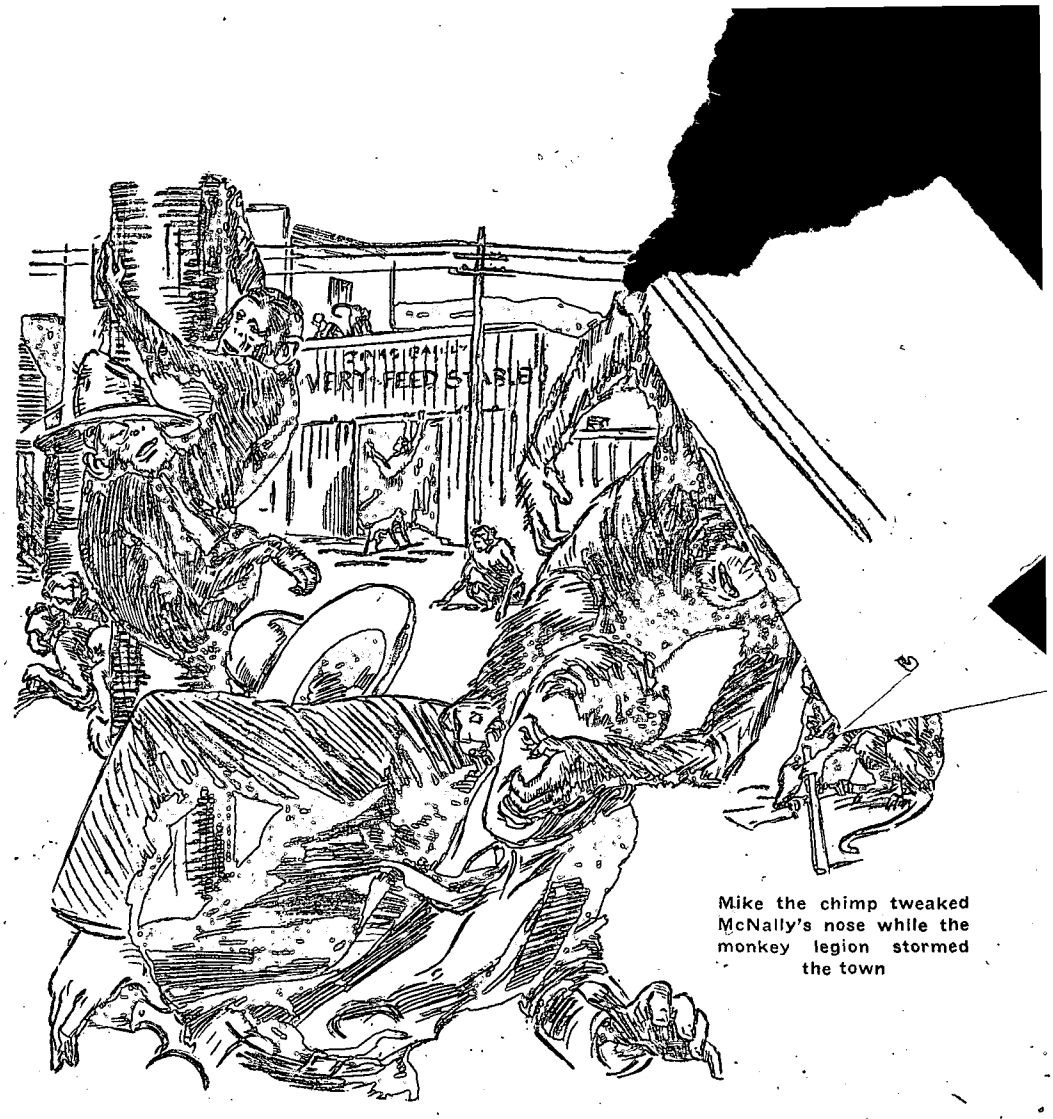

Mike the chimp tweaked McNally's nose while the monkey legion stormed the town

A hilarious short novelet of Dave McNally, the animal man

McNally said: "Not yet. Tell the conductor I want to see him. Mr. McNally."

The porter looked dubious. "Conductor mighty busy man, suh. He—"

"Mr. Dave McNally!"

"Yeah, yas, suh." The porter did his streamlined shuffle toward the front of the train.

Out of the corner of his eye, McNally saw that the little brunette was unimpressed. Maybe he'd better stick to drinking. . . . No. He was stuck at home for the duration of the European war, stuck to trains and airplanes and—probably—buses, to living in cities and freezing in blizzards and broiling in the midwestern summer sun.

Stuck to all the things he disliked, and if he added drinking which he had always liked too much—the end of hostilities abroad would find him an alcoholic wreck. Which would mean that he would never put to sea again on some improbable freighter bound for an impossible corner of the earth to bring back an incredible cargo of animals or freaks to astound the circus and carny world. The novelty-collecting business was nothing for a lush.

At any rate, he had impressed the

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porter. From the look of that dark face, the conductor's reception of McNally's message had been sufficiently servile; the conductor himself, cap in hand, was hurrying behind the steward.

"Yes, Mr. McNally. Everything all right, I hope?"

"Sure," McNally said. "I was just wondering. Is there any way we could get a wire from the Delta Railroad about my cars? I don't want them to be late at Hopkins. You only lay over there fifteen minutes, according to your timetable here," Dave McNally tapped a pocket, "and if they're late—"

"I'll hook a message off at the next station we go through," the conductor said. "You're right, Mr. McNally. They're supposed to be there an hour ahead of us, but the Delta—" He rolled up his eyes to show how inferior the small Delta Railroad was to his own magnificent employers.

"Swell," McNally said, a little lamely. "And be sure the day coach goes ahead of the animal car."

"Yes, sir, but it's unusual, Mr. McNally. We usually put the performers' car second, so as to enable the people to come back into the train for meals and so—"

"That's the idea. I want them to pass through the animal car each time so's if anythin's wrong with the stock they'll see it."

"Yes, Mr. McNally." The conductor departed with his own version of the roadbed glide. The porter lingered.

"Another highball, Mr. McNally?"

"I hate drinking alone," McNally lied. He had been watching the girl in plaid out of the corner of his eye. She hadn't missed a word of the conference. McNally looked at her directly, and she looked away quickly. He leaned forward, "Won't you join me?"

She started convincingly. Something about the little jump worried McNally; he'd seen it before. He—but it was too late. She turned, smiled. "I'll have lemonade, please."

The porter went away and McNally changed seats to be next to the girl.

THE deep blue eyes she turned up to him were unfamiliar. The cute little swirl of dark hair that came out from under the pert Scotch cap was fashionable, and thus familiar. But he was sure he had never seen that nose before. His first fear, that he had recrossed an earlier trail, died. Then she smiled, and the smile was familiar, and—

"Going far?" he asked.

"Hollywood," she said. "Hollywood, California."

"You couldn't go much farther," McNally told her, "without getting your feet wet."

"What? Oh," she said in a too-familiar, childish voice, "you mean because of the Pacific Ocean."

This, McNally, is what you get for picking up girls on trains. At your age. "That's right, Gracie," he said.

"My name's Myrtle," she told him, "Myrtle Burbank. Isn't it a pretty name?"

"With all the world to choose from, you should have gotten a pretty one," McNally told her. "You're going to try and crash Hollywood, huh?"

"Why, how did you know?"

He said, "Well, the Myrna Loy startle had me puzzled. The Miriam Hopkins smile started me thinking. But the Gracie Allen voice told me. Good luck," said McNally, gulping his drink. He started to rise. But Myrtle Burbank caught his arm.

"Don't go," she said. "You're in the show business, too, aren't you?"

"Too?" McNally gulped. "Yeah. I'm in show business. Dave McNally."

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"Now, don't tell me. Let me guess. Were you Gary Cooper's friend in—"

"I am not an actor," McNally said between clenched teeth. "I am the biggest collector of novelties in the business. Over the last five years I have brought back to this country nearly as many wild animals as Frank Buck.

"In addition, I have acquired and put on the circuits forty-two trained animal acts—including Thurston the Gorilla Magician, The Harmonizing Cats of Siam, Lionel the Laughable Lion and numerous other headliners. On the side I have rounded up nearly two dozen novelty human acts, which include whole native villages for World's Fairs."

"Oh, my," said Miss Myrtle Burbank. "How glamourous. Do you sell things to the movies?"

"Sure. Both direct and through the animal ranches around Hollywood. But now I have to be going to—" He tried to disengage his arm, and then, looking at her face, realized what he had said.

Oh, grief in the early dawn. He had told a stage-struck girl that he had movie connections. He had cut his own throat, that was all he'd done.

That cold light in her eye was not borrowed from Garbo or Dietrich. It was pure Burbank. "Are you going to Hollywood now?" she asked.

McNally said: "No." He was glad he could be truthful. "I am on my way to pick up a Chinese dog and pony show I own. The manager had an appendix attack and I'm going to manage it myself till he gets back. This war has put a finish to my regular business for a while; I'm not going to sea with any ten-thousand-dollar cargo of animals while there's a chance of being torpedoed.

"So till it blows over, I'm trouble-shooting for my shows and my agent's, Jake Loeb. I pick up my show at Hopkins, Kansas, tonight, and take it down to Oklahoma City. I get off there. So you see I have a lot to do. Goodnight, Miss Burbank, and I sure hope you make good in—"

"Can't I help you?" she asked. "I'm a good secretary and stenographer."

"I need no help."

He got away from her and, though it was only eight o'clock in the evening, he had his car porter make up his berth. He got into it and thought seriously of pinning the curtains shut with safety pins. But he fell right off to sleep, aided by a feeling of escape, and possibly by the four drinks.

WHEN the hand groped through the curtains and shook his shoulder, his first move was for the revolver under his pillow. Then he remembered where he was, and looked at his wrist-watch instead. One in the morning, unless he had crossed into a new time zone.

He caught the hand, said: "All right, I'm awake. What is it?"

"Telegram, Misteh McNally."

He fumbled a quarter out of the trousers hanging near his head, shoved it through the curtains, and got the yellow envelope. He switched on the reading light, punching a pillow under his shoulders so as to sit up straighter. He felt a little sick, probably from sleeping in the conditioned air.

It was from Jake Loeb. Change of booking, probably.

Then he read it, and nearly screamed, though he was not a hysterical man.

DRUNKEN ROUSTABOUT OPENED CAGES MONKEY CARAVAN IN COTTONSVILLE MISSOURI. MONKEYS AND LAWYERS ALL OVER TOWN MONKEYS BITING RUBES SCARING WOMEN WRECKING THINGS LAWYERS SUING ME WHICH MEANS

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YOU TOO. GO THERE DO SOMETHING OR WIRE ME JAKE LOEB AND I GRAB AIRPLANE FOR ALASKA HIDE TWENTY YEARS YOU BETTER TOO HURRY OH MY—HURRY

McNally lay back and clenched his fists. He had put together the monkey caravan. Two hundred monkeys, some performers and some just menagerie, that traveled around and played for a flat quarter admission. He owned—let's see—forty percent of it, Jake forty, and they had given twenty to the man who put up the money for the equipment.

Say Cottonsville, Missouri, had five thousand inhabitants, and each one sued for five thousand dollars, a reasonable sum for being bitten by a monkey. Five times five is twenty-five, and add six zeros. It was either twenty-five million dollars or two hundred and fifty million dollars and who cared? It was too much money.

He pulled on trousers over his pajamas, shrugged into a bathrobe, thrust his feet into his shoes. He went into the men's washroom of his car. The porter was shining shoes.

"Porter, you know where Cottonsville, Missouri is?"

"You kin git the Frisco Line to about ten miles from there, or git off at Ewingston. 'En you takes the E.C.&J. She's a narrow gauge—"

"I have to get there in a hurry."

"Yes, suh, I sees you do, yes, suh."

"How about airplanes?"

"I don' know nothin' about them things, boss. I'm a railroader."

"Tell the conductor I want to see him right away."

"He'll be up forrard in a club car."

"Okay." McNally went storming up through the train. Two hundred monkeys working reasonably long hours—and a monkey on the loose does not respect union hours—ought to be able to bite, say, five people an hour, per monkey, a hundred people a day times two hundred monkeys is—four zeros—four thousand people. That should be a good average.

Of course, lots of monkeys don't bite at all. But on the other hand, a good vicious monkey encountering a large gathering—say a Parent-Teachers' Association—could make up for a round dozen or more of non-active monkeys. Say the population of Cottonsville was five thousand, in forty-eight hours everyone would be bitten one and three-eighths times, or was it—

"You're going nuts, McNally," he said. "Cut it out." He pushed open the door of the club car and stormed in. He yelled at the porter: "Bourbon and—"

"Soda," the waiter said, struggling to his feet. "Yes, sir, Mr. Mc—"

BUT McNally was past him. The conductor had obviously been asleep in a lounge at the end of the car. He opened his eyes and blinked.

McNally barked: "I want to get off this train. Right away."

The conductor struggled up from oblivion. "Oh, Mr. McNally. Why, it isn't time to make Hopkins yet. I'm on the job, Mr. McNally, I'll call you in plenty—"

"I'm not going to Hopkins. I have to go to Cottonsville, Missouri at—" A familiar voice broke in; it was La Burbank, playing herself. "Cottonsville? Why that's right near where I live; my Aunt Barry lives there; I've visited her a score of—"

McNally stared wildly at the girl.

"Is there an airport there? I have to get there right away." He waved the telegram.

"There certainly is. Why Cottonsville's a big town, nearly eight thousand people there and—"

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Wasn't eight thousand the number he had decided the monkeys could bite an hour or something? "Conductor, it's very important that I get off at the next airport. Where would that be?"

"Airport over in Wichita," the conductor said. "Let you off right up ahead here, and you can get a car to drive you over. No trouble, I hope, Mr. McNally?"

"Trouble? Trouble? I'm about to be sued by everyone in a town of eight thousand monkeys."

The Burbank was off again. "Oh, now, Mr. McNally, the people in Cottonsville are not monkeys. They're nice as they can be; I must have a dozen cousins there. And they wouldn't sue you if they knew you were a friend of mine, and had bought me lemonade, and all—"

"What? Say that again."

"Why, nice people don't sue their cousin's friends, Mr. McNally."

He turned, making his voice as soft as possible. He said: "Are you Southern, Myrtle?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. McNally. There just aren't *any* Republicans in our county."

"I see."

"Mr. McNally, I hoped you'd be back. I've been thinking, how lucky it was and all, meeting you. Maybe I won't go on to Hollywood. Maybe you're the person Fate meant me to meet. I do believe in Fate, don't you? You said you managed acts, and I do just wonderful imitations."

"You're hired," he said. "Thirty a week to start. Now, conductor, about this plane . . ."

II

BUMPING over rutty, back-country roads, making time for Wichita through the night, Myrtle asked: "What am I hired for, Mr. McNally? You didn't even hear my imitations?"

"I thought you could start as my secretary, learn show business from the inside first."

•

Settling back in an old Curtiss Robin—the only plane that would make the trip at a moment's notice—Myrtle wanted to know: "Don't yo' want to heah mah imitations, Mr. McNally? Ah kin do an old dahky talkin' to—"

He said: "Not now, Myrtle."

•

Climbing out of the Robin at Cottonsville airport, five miles out of town, she said: "But, sugah—"

It occurred to him that she had been getting progressively Southern as she got near home. Was this one of her imitations, or was it the real thing, or did it matter?

It didn't matter. Because the kid who had been lounging on the edge of the field in an old jalopy said, as they concluded a deal to drive five miles for five dollars: "You newspaper folk? There's been a lot comin' in, with all these here monkeys loose. A big monkey, what they call a chimpanzee, bit the mayor last time I was in town, about an hour ago."

Going into town—this road was paved at least—Myrtle said: "Won't mah Aunt Barry be surprised to learn Ah got a job with a famous man like you. Ah'll bet just everybody in town'll want to meet you, Mr. McNally."

He said, "I'll bet."

But then they were into town. It was seven o'clock in the morning, and Cottonsville looked like the sort of place that got up with the chickens. There should have been farmers' trucks on the street. There should certainly have been some sort of activity on the loading platform of that big creamery.

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But there wasn't a soul in sight. An old fashioned handset traffic signal in the middle of the street with a beach umbrella over it had been set halfway between *Stop* and *Go* and deserted. From the sagging contours of the chair next to it, its ordinary operator was a big cop, and heavy, but he was invisible at present.

Nobody about? Well—

One lone little man was out in sight. He was nailing boards over the window of a store, covering up a plate glass expanse that said: *Gerter, Dry Goods.* Between each two blows of the hammer, Gerter peered apprehensively over his shoulder.

McNally said, "Stop here, son."

The driver slowed down. "Not me, misteh. This ol' bus is all I got to make a living with. If I left it out here on Main Street, it wouldn't be no good ever again."

Myrtle said, "Why the people in Cottonsville are just as honest as the day is long. You could park your car here all night and they wouldn't touch it 'cept maybe for the spare tire."

"Lady, it ain't the people, it's the monkeys."

"I don't understand why you keep calling those nice Cottonsville people monkeys. There are representatives of the finest Southern families here in —"

McNally said, "All right, Myrtle. Just let us out here, son, and then you can go on back. Where did you take all those newspaper people you are talking about?"

"I guess they're barricaded in the hotel, misteh. See—"

McNally followed the line of the grimy finger. Yeah, that was, or had been a hotel. Now it was just a solid front of tin softdrink signs and second-hand lumber.

McNALLY carried his bags and Myrtle's to the sidewalk. He stood there a moment watching the car do a U turn and start back. Behind him Mr. Gerter's hammer beat an unrhythmic melody as the car came up to the traffic signal; at that moment the signal started going around furiously.

The driver stopped, or rather hesitated; then he shot ahead, but not in time. A pop bottle shot out from under the traffic cop's chair and crunched to bits under the left rear tire, which blew out with a hissing, angry noise.

The jalopy went on out of town on three tires, while a tiny figure ran out from under the chair, climbed up the pole and sat on the *Stop* sign, scratching itself.

McNally shook his head, wincing. Heaving the suitcases, he walked over to Mr. Gerter. "Can you tell me if they've caught many of the monkeys yet?"

The dry-goods man didn't stop hammering. "Go on over to the hotel, knock on the door, they'll let you in. It ain't safe to stand out here, mister."

"I'm not afraid of monkeys," McNally said. "I'm here to round them up, I'm a monkey expert. I—"

Something hit him behind the right ear. He went down on his knees, forward. He was not out, but he was stunned, for a moment, dazed. His fingers, groping on the sidewalk for support, encountered the nut for a half-inch screw; a nasty missile.

Still hammering, Mr. Gerter said: "I told you so. You better—"

There was a tinkling noise, silence, and then a crash as the plate-glass window—covered except for its top two feet—broke inward. Mr. Gerter stood regarding it a moment, then wailed: "A shot like Diffy Dean yet. And me with

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my insurance lapsed." He ran across toward the hotel, still wailing.

McNally, on one knee, saw Mr. Gerter jump halfway across the street. His straw hat left his head and came sailing back to hit McNally in the nose.

At McNally's elbow Myrtle said, "I declare, I don't know what's come over Cottonsville. People have just gone crazy, that's all. Mr. McNally, before we go around to my aunt's, don't you want to hear my imitations? Then you could tell me where I was gonna work, an' I could tell my Aunt Barry."

"Not now, Myrtle." McNally, his head throbbing, stood up. "Let's get the bags and—Owwwww."

Their bags were still there. In a manner of speaking. The clothes were all over every place, with a silken garment that certainly was not McNally's crowning the effect by hanging from the traffic signal. The straps that bound McNally's best pigskin dressing case had been bitten through and were nearly gone.

"They're not monkeys, they're locusts," McNally said between gritted teeth. He grabbed Myrtle's hand. "He who fights and runs away . . . C'mon, babe."

He dragged her across the street toward the hotel. Apparently they had been watched from within, because the door opened as they approached. They made it just ahead of a jar of cold cream; the cream spattered and broke all over the closing door, and again Main Street was deserted.

INSIDE the hotel, a portly man with his arm in a sling greeted them. "You newspaper people? I'm Austin T. Moody, the Mayor of Cottonsville. You may quote me as saying that we shall have justice from these New York show people who have loosed this plague upon us if we have to fight the case to the Supreme Court of the United States. I—"

"We aren't from a newspaper, Cousin Austin. Don't you—"

"Why, dog me if it isn't little Myra Ochiltree. What you doin' home, Myra? I thought you'd gone to Hollywood to do your imitations for the movies?"

His Honor turned to some men behind him. "Gentlemen of the press, I want you to meet a local celebrity, the daughter of my good friend and cousin Jeff Ochiltree of R.F.D. 3. She acts under the name of Myrtle Burbank, and if I say it myself who used to dangle her on my knee, she can imitate any kind of radio actor or animal you can name. The Ochiltrees spent a pretty penny having Myra coached in St. Louis, but—"

"That's swell, Mayor," one of the newspapermen said, "but hold it. If newspaper pictures aren't worse than I thought they were, the hard-faced bloke that just entered is Dave McNally, the animal man. Right?"

Myrtle said, "Yes, this is Mr. McNally. I'm his secretary, Cousin Austin, he wants me to learn the theater from the business end before he gets me a job doing my imitations. I—"

"Mr. McNally," the mayor roared, "I understand you're part owner of this —this maniacal zoo that is devastating our city!"

McNally swallowed, glaring at Myrtle. A swell idea to bring that little blabbermouth along. Oh, a brilliant McNally notion. "Yeah."

"Well, sir, I wish to inform you that the damage already done must approximate thirty thousand dollars. And it is mounting every moment, sir, every—"

McNally was so relieved he could cry. They could pay that. He had had

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no idea how long the monks had been loose. He had made it in time, like the United States Marines. They couldn't bite many people at night, and apparently that was all they had had a chance to do.

McNally said, "Okay. My secretary will accept complaints for damages, while I go out and see what I can do about rounding up these simian simoons."

One of the reporters laughed.

McNally bowed. "Thanks for the hand, buddy. Now. Where was the show parked? I'll need the cages."

The mayor waved a hand. "On the east edge of town."

"Okay. And is the town grocer present?" Then, as a couple of men stepped forward. "I'll buy out your banana supply. I'm going to need bait. I'll settle later." He felt good now that he was doing something. "And, how about a druggist? . . . Thank you. Here"—McNally wrote on the back of an envelope—"is a prescription. I'll want five pounds of that."

The druggist glanced at it. "Five pounds? Why that's enough to put half of Missouri asleep. I don't think—well, anyway, not without a doctor's prescription."

"Is there a doctor in the house? Doc, sign that. It's what we use on a monkey catching expedition. Thank you. Now, druggist—"

"My shop's across the street. I don't see—"

"I'll convoy you," McNally said. He grabbed the thin little druggist by the shoulder and hurried him to the door. Somebody opened it. McNally leaped out on the sidewalk, still holding his pharmacist. "Which way?"

The druggist pointed diagonally across the street. There was no glass left in the window, but it obviously had been a drug store. McNally used the monkey handler's best trick; he took a deep breath, and hissed as loud and as long as he could. Then he half carried the apothecary to his shop, shoved him through the glassless window, and stopped.

III

NOTHING happened for two minutes, three. Then the monkeys, deciding that they had not, after all, heard a snake, came to life again. Two little rhesus monks came down Main Street high overhead, swinging along the telegraph wires. A chimpanzee swaggered around a corner, dressed in a farmer's straw hat, followed by an admiring group of marmosets.

Pausing in front of Mr. Gerter's, the chimp put his feet against the copper bottom of the window. Then he locked his strong hands around a board, braced himself, and pulled. The board came loose, and the marmosets scrambled through.

The chimp took time to pull another board so he could go in himself without squeezing. From inside the store came the happy squealing of amused simians.

McNally muttered, "I spent eight days in a stinking grass hut in west Africa to catch that chimp. Those marmosets had colds all the way up from Ecuador, and I sat up nights feeding them whisky and milk out of an eyedropper. And for what? So's they could wreck the store of a guy who'll sue surer than a beartrap. Gratitude, where's those monkeys' gratitude?"

He walked down to Gerter's. "Hey, Mike," he called to the chimpanzee. "Come here, Mike. Remember me, old fellow? Remember?"

The chimp seemed to remember. At any rate he stopped posing in front of

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the mirror in the middle of the store, and swung, blinking, toward McNally. Then he lumbered to the boarded up front of the shop. He thrust a long arm through.

"Good Mike, c'mon Mike. Nice ol' Mike."

This seemed to satisfy the chimp's curiosity. Apparently he remembered McNally now. He knocked the animal man's hat off and tweaked McNally's nose. From the depth of the hotel came muffled roars of laughter. The Fourth Estate, no doubt.

"He isn't wild, just playful," McNally muttered. His fingers went to the gun on his hip. But they came away again. He couldn't do it. His whole adult life—since at eighteen he had quit a good job as press agent for a circus to take a flyer in African tigers—his whole life had been spent taking 'em alive.

Furthermore, he hadn't made this mad dash to Cottonsville simply for the purpose of acting as a one-man firing squad.

That chimp in a cage was worth good money. He was going to need money. And if, in a jungle with no equipment except what he could bring in on porters' backs, he could cage a chimp, he could do it in Missouri, with all the equipment in the world at the end of a telegraph wire.

But there was no use walking around talking to his errant apes. He would have to campaign. Let's see. A thousand men at four dollars a day—five if they were afraid—could surround the town and walk in, pen the monkeys into the center square.

Or could they?

No. Inexperienced hands, he had learned early in his career, were more hindrance than help. A charge of monkeys would terrify the farmhand, and the monkeys would scatter and be wilder than ever. In fact they would stampede, if that was the right word, and go into other towns, maybe cover Missouri and maybe Arkansas and Oklahoma too.

The druggist stuck his head out. He had found and donned a tin helmet, painted with the letters: *American Legion 1934*. "Here's your prescription, sir."

"Thanks," McNally said. "Where is the nearest grocery store?"

"Two doors down, on the other side of the telegraph office. But aren't you going to take me back to the hotel?"

"Yeah, come on." He hissed again, and ran the druggist out and across the street. When the door opened, Myrtle popped out. "Listen, Mr. McNally, if I could do my imitations—"

"Good grief, girl, pull yourself together, will you?" He pushed her almost roughly back into the hotel and ran across the street. The hissing spell had broken up, because he was pelted with pebbles, bits of tar and nails from the roof of a building where a troop of monks had taken up their fort.

As he hit the door of the grocery store, still clutching the medicine to his bosom, there was the noise of a lot of glass breaking in the next block. Cottonsville was being taken apart bit by bit.

THE grocery store was locked with a padlock. He shot it off with his gun; a little more damage this late in the day wouldn't do any harm. He plunged inside in the silence that followed the roar of the revolver; the monkeys, scared, had stopped their depredations for a moment.

Ah, glory be. Hanging over the counter was a big bunch of bananas. How had they overlooked those?

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He went to work, peeling the bananas, breaking them in half, dipping each half in the powder. Through the walls of the shop came the steady clacking of telegraph instruments. Apparently the operator was still at his post. Wire for help? No. He would—

A chattering out in the street brought his head up. It was Mike, the chimp, leading his little circle of fans out of town again. This time Mike was wearing a football helmet, no doubt from the stock of Mr. Gerter.

McNally grinned, evilly. Oh, Michael, here you go! Gently he tossed a dozen of his doped bananas out into the street. The silky white crystals clung all over the bruised yellow meat, shone in the Missouri sun.

Mike grunted, stopped. He picked up a piece of banana in his fingers, turned it over in his hand, the pink palm open.

McNally held his breath.

With his free hand, Mike shoved the helmet to one side, scratched his head; then, gravely, carefully, he dusted the banana free of every bit of powder, popped it into his mouth, and chewed it with little grunts of satisfaction.

The marmosets, with the monkey's proverbial trick of imitation, dusted their bits just as carefully and ate them.

McNally sank back to a sitting position and then jumped up again. He had sat on a flat of tomatoes.

Sunk, sunk. He backed away, his hand over his eyes, because the monkeys, gay over finding food, were pelting him with the splinters and nails from the gutter, and he kicked with his heel against the telegraph office door. It opened, a hand jerked him in, and he breathed again.

"Ain't this awful?" asked the telegraph operator. "Worse'n a war."

"Yeah. Look, send a wire for me. To Jake Loeb, Paramount Building, New York. Got it: 'Hire all available men with menagerie experience, shoot them my assistance, need help badly.' Sign that McNally and—"

"Oh, you Mr. McNally? Got a wire for you." The operator handed over a yellow sheet of paper.

HAVE HAD TO SEND ALL AVAILABLE CASH TO EUROPE TO PAY FOR PASSAGE HOME TWO DOG AND PONY SHOWS WORKING THERE. NO CASH ON HAND. STALL COTTONSVILLE CLAIMS LONG AS POSSIBLE. HAVE BOOKING MONKEY CARAVAN CHICAGO FLAT RATE TWENTY THOUSAND PER WEEK FOR THREE WEEKS. HAVE YOU GOT MONKEYS CORRALLED YET? MR. LOEB HOME IN BED NERVOUS PROSTRATION. WHEN YOU GET CARAVAN OFF FOR CHICAGO COME HOME RUN OFFICE.

JANE

Jane was Jane McGregor, Jake's secretary and office manager.

The phone rang. McNally said, "That'll be for me and it'll be grief."

The telegraph man answered it. He said, "You're right about the first part. It's the mayor."

Those lush accents boomed, "Misteh McNally, I have held off as long as possible, realizing that the salvage of your animals was to the interest of my constituents in collecting their claims from you.

"But I can hold out no longer. I have phoned for the state police and the militia. In an hour two hundred men will come through this town with guns and shoot every ape they find running loose. They—"

"Nix, nix. Hold it, Your Honor, I'll be right over."

IV

McNALLY rushed for the door, stormed across the street. A bunch of carrots hit him just below the left

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ear, wrapped themselves around his neck. But the hotel door opened, and he got in.

Undraping the carrots, he handed them to Myrtle. "Here, secretary, give these to the cook. Now, Mr. Mayor—"

Myrtle took the carrots. She said, "I've been arguing with Cousin Austin, Mr. McNally, but he won't listen. And maybe he's right. These gentlemen have all been filing claims with me every few minutes, like you said. They watch out the window, and whenever the little monkeys break something, they tell me and I write it down." She waved some sheets of paper.

McNally stared at her. "You told me they wouldn't sue any friend of yours."

"Oh, but their business' are being destroyed. It's over fifty thousand dollars now, Mr. McNally. But I've made five dollars; this gentleman here paid me that to do an imitation of a lion for his movie camera."

"Lion?"

"Yes, Mr. McNally. I reckon you get your percentage on—"

McNally said, "Which gentleman?" His voice was high, shrill.

A thin guy shuffled up.

"Me. I'm a freelance cameraman; my brother and I here own a sound outfit out of Chi. We were down at Springfield takin' pictures of a dog show for a meat packin' outfit to use in its advertising, and we shot up here to see could we get something to sell to the regular newsreel companies. But they all got outfits in."

McNally said, "Hang around. Oh, hang around, buddy. Steer clear of those newsreel boys, and keep mum. Myrtle!"

He grabbed the girl's shapely arm, led her to one side. The inimical eyes of the Chamber of Commerce were on him; those boys were getting restive. He said, "Babe, you imitate animals?"

"Yes, of course. That's what I been telling you. My daddy paid to have me taught imitations at the Stage, Screen and Radio School of the Three Arts in St. Louis, and our teacher used to take us out to the zoo and make us study the animal.

"But I can imitate actors good, too. Wanta hear me do Walter Huston imitating Lew Lehr? I was always good. When I was little I could do a rooster and all the hens on the farm would come running and—" She crowed, convincingly but surprisingly.

McNally clapped a hand over her mouth. "Later, Myrtle; later, babe. Listen. You've been around zoos. Ever see a baby monkey fall?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. McNally. We were so scared, one of the girls in the class cried."

"Skip that. What kind of a noise did the little monk make?"

She opened her mouth and let out a chattering wail or a wailing chatter that carried McNally back to the holds of a dozen freighters, to the huts of a dozen jungles. That noise that had so often awakened him at night.

"Myrtle, I just noticed," he said. "You're a right pretty girl. I like you, Myrtle." He raised his voice. "You sound track man, come here."

Myrtle said, "I was afraid you were mad at me, Mr. McNally. You wouldn't let me tell you, I wanted to imitate a monkey, and maybe they'd all follow me. Like the Pie-eyed Piper of—"

"Easy, Myrtle. I just gave you a compliment. Now, Mr.—"

The thin guy said:

"Lafzig. Lafzig Brothers of Chicago."

"Lafzig, listen. You and your brother get out of here the back way, and get your outfit down the street about a block east of here. Myrtle, you go with

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him. And Laffy, keep Myrtle inside the sound truck where she won't be hurt. She's valuable."

"But what we gonna do, Mac?"

"Laffy, listen. You know my rep, if you're in show business. You know I know an attraction when I see one? I'm going to stage, for you and you alone, two reels that'll sell to every wired house in the world. I provide the producing, directing, writing and acting. You shoot. We split fifty-fifty. You on?"

"I'm on my way."

McNally went and borrowed the tin helmet from the druggist. Then he wrapped himself in the heaviest coat he could borrow from a closet in the lobby, and took off.

V

ON THE east edge of town he found the monkey caravan. It was a two-truck outfit, big trac-and-trail trucks one of which had carried the cages, one the tents and props. The cages were constructed so they unbolted and made a caged arena.

Neither then nor later did he find the manager of the show or either of the trainers he had hired. But locked in one of the cages was a roustabout.

The man was frantic.

He screamed, "It wasn't me, Mr. McNally. I didn't do it. I been trying to get those monkeys back up, but I can't do it alone and the rest of the gang mud-trailed it outa town. I—"

"All right, son. Unlock yourself, and let's go."

McNally trotted around to the front of the truck. His nose was bleeding and one ear was puffy; he had not reached here without a few minor skirmishes. You cannot throw things at monkeys because it puts ideas in their heads.

The hood of the motor was up. Someone or something had been beating on the hood of the motor with a wrench.

"It was a ringtail done that," the roustabout said. "The other bus is a Diesel; it'd go, but they done flattened all its tires."

"We'll switch that trac to this bus, then," McNally said. "And— Here they come."

He and the roughneck just made it to the cage. They pulled the door shut after them.

It was now explained why the damage in town had not been more. Just past the show grounds was a pecan grove; at least a hundred and fifty of the animals had never left there.

"They keep a-coming back here," the roustabout said. "I figger they want me to feed 'em."

The monks, led by the other chimp of the show, Molly, swung in around the cage. The more thrifty among them carried a stock of pecan nuts; a little lady rhesus with a charming face tossed one in gently to McNally.

He picked it up, bowed. "Turnabout's fair play," he said. "They've been doing that to you a long time, babe."

It seemed fair enough.

But a gray spider monkey had other ideas. He banged a rock into the cage. Instantly there was a shower of them. McNally cowered under his tin helmet and his heavy overcoat. He didn't look up until the rain had ceased.

The roustabout moved beside him. "You all right, boss?"

"Bruised but living."

"Me, too. Let's go."

By alternately hissing and working they got the tires changed on the Diesel tractor, used it to pull the cage trailer away from its wrecked motive power, hooked up.

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"You wanta drive?" the roustabout asked.

"You drive. Think those monkeys'll follow us?"

"Should. This is the only home they know."

McNally rode the trailer. The driver pulled slowly toward town, and the monkeys peered out of the pecan grove. McNally raised his voice, remembering Mike. "Molly. Oh, Mollllly—"

The chimp came out of the woods. She ambled over to where the truck had been. Seeing her cage gone, she chattered, and monkeys galore—big monks, little monks, spider monks, rhesus monks, squirrel monks and marmosets—clustered around her big knees. McNally called again and she looked up, began to follow.

So far, so good.

McNally beat on the driver's cab to stop him at the edge of town. With a piece of wire and trainer's hook he broke open a garage door and stole the passenger car inside. He drove it into town, where the sound truck waited. There McNally got out.

MIKE came down the street, ambling along, looking for trouble. McNally gave his best hiss of the day and gained three minutes; he raced for the sound truck.

He pulled open the door, barked: "This is the scenario; everybody listen. Myrtle, you're the heroine. Get into that car, and go to the edge of town. Count to a hundred if you can. Then drive back in and park right under the mike; you know a microphone when you see one? Good.

"That roustabout just bringing the cages up and I will be fighting the monks. Laffy, you pan from us to the car stopping, Myrtle getting out. Myrtle, get out in a hurry; you might show a little leg while you do it. Stop under the mike, and give it to us in a brave womanly voice: 'What's happened?'

"I say: 'This monkey show's been loose all night, terrorizing the town. The damage has been terrific.' Then I break off: 'Aren't you Myrtle Burbank, the great imitator?' You give that a yes, but modestly Myrtle, modestly.

"I say: 'Miss Burbank, the lives and property of eight thousand people depend on you. Get into that cage and do your monkey imitations. They'll follow you if anyone.' Incidentally," McNally said, ducking and giving another hiss, "while we're doing all this, the monks are ad libbing. Then you get into the cage, and God go with you."

"But, Mr. McNally, you might get hurt."

McNally sighed.

"I'd rather be bruised than battered, baby. Get going."

McNally got her into the car and started away. He grabbed up a trainer's hook. In the street, the town monkeys led by Mike had met the country monkeys led by Molly. Mike kissed Molly and cuffed her behind the ear. A pitched battle between the two forces started.

In the midst of it worked McNally and the roughneck, their hooks swinging. This was no acting; Mike apparently wanted to know where Molly had been all night, and was willing to tear her apart to find out. Under the mike they roared and screamed at each other.

Myrtle's voice cut in just as something ripped McNally's coat up the back. "What's going on here?" She could deliver lines.

They went through the little dialogue, and then—glory be—it was all over. With the hooks, they kept the

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monkeys back so that Myrtle could get out of each cage; and did those monkeys pour in. The wail of a distressed baby was too much for the lady monks, and the gents followed their now docile wives. The whole thing couldn't have taken more than five minutes.

McNally leaned against the last cage to be locked, and sighed. "Okay," he waved at the Lafzigs. "Cut."

Lafzig swung down from the camera. "Boy," he screeched. "What staging. At thing'll book more than a Mickey Mouse. We—"

"Get it out of town," McNally said. "Rush the prints to Jake Loeb, Paramount Building, New York." He was tired. He reached down, patted Myrtle. "Kid, you were swell. You're not much on brains, but you're a wonderful imitator. . . . You guys get out of town with the prints and Myrtle before these people attach 'em. I got to stay here and face these suits."

Lafzig said, "But any of the big releasing companies'll give us more for this film than the damages done in town."

"Yeah, but when? Jake and I are strapped. Two weeks, five weeks from now we'll be all right, but-I'll have to sit in jail here till then."

"I never heard anything so silly," Myrtle said in her Gracie Allen voice. "Uncle Drew wouldn't put you in jail, Mr. McNally, after all you've done for me."

"Uncle Drew?"

"He's the county judge. My Aunt Barry's husband. He isn't really my uncle—just by marriage—but he—"

"Myrtle," said McNally. "You're in the act from now on."

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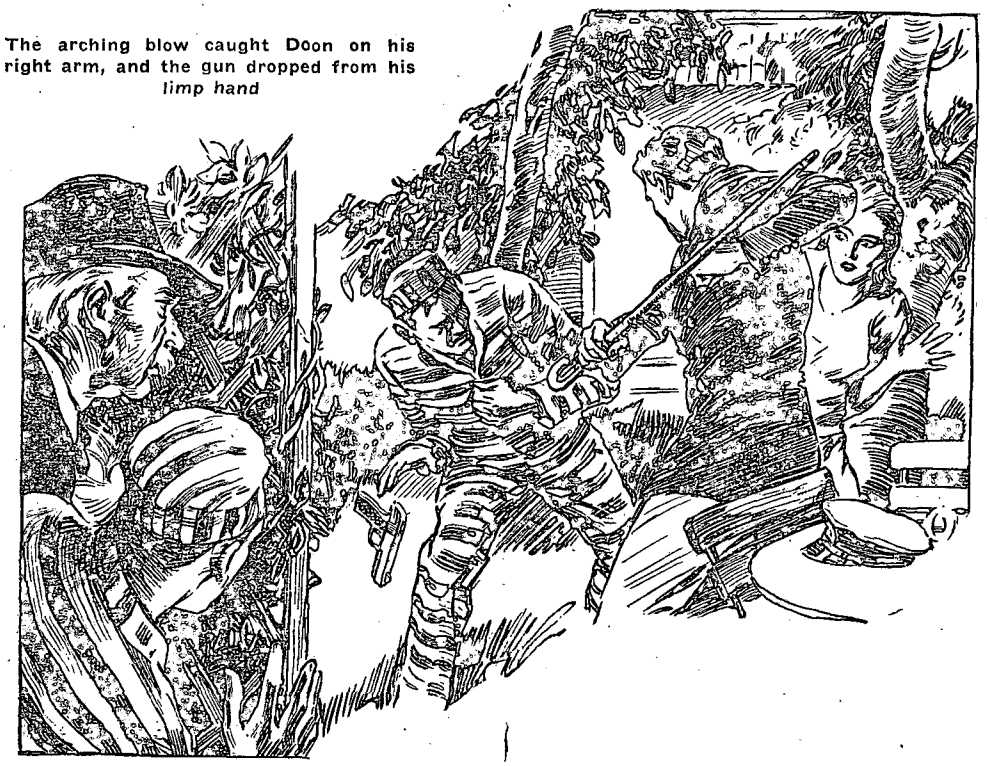

The arching blow caught Doon on his right arm, and the gun dropped from his *limp hand*

Butcher Bird

By WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

Author of "Angel Sharks," "The Man from Laramie," etc.

Salute old Captain Bo. He held a chopper gun on tough muggs for a lifetime without shooting one of them; and when the ax was ready to fall, he learned cheerfully that the hard way out was best

WITH a chopper gun on his arm, Captain Beauregard Harris stood under a palm and watched his gang, strung down the highway. His smoky eyes squinted with suspicion.

Somwhere in his outfit trouble had come up. A few minutes ago everything had been all right. Now it wasn't all right.

Under the alert rifles of Captain Bo and his guards, the gang was working shoulder on the Trail that afternoon. All eighty-four convicts were on one side of the highway and bunched close. Easier to guard against a break, that way.

It was almost another day. On a county road back of Captain Bo three big monkey-wagons were parked, ready to wheel the gang home to supper and cells.

The trouble, the something suddenly

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wrong—Captain Bo couldn't see it or hear it, but just the same he knew it was there. He felt it.

Not that Captain Bo was psychic. From slouchy hat to snake-proof boots there wasn't a suggestion of psychic about him, or even of keenness. He looked slow and heavy; a stooped, wornout hulk of a big old man.

His aging hadn't been gradual. It had started with the shooting-up he had got last April. Somehow he hadn't ever shaken that off.

But twenty-five years of bossing chain gangs, not county-vagrant dishwater but raw poison, had made Captain Bo ultra wise at his narrow specialty. Whence and why those convicts came to him, the right or wrong of the whole sad business, that he did not know about. That was for wiser men to judge.

But he did know how to run a gang. In the swing of arms and sway of stripes he could read the moods of the outfits he bossed. Without knowing just how he did it, he could smell trouble before it *whirred* and struck. And he smelled trouble now.

He crooked a finger at the nearest guard, crisp young Frank Alton. Frank, he knew, was going to get his job, and mighty soon; just as soon as Frank got onto the ropes. No use fighting against it or bellyaching; old jalopies had to go to the junk pile some time.

"Something, chief?"

"Frank, they's trouble down the line."

"Where?"

"Cain't say. But take my place here. Whatever's up, I got to find out an' splosh it."

He started down the road, slowly, eyeing each man. His chopper gun was in his hands, the trigger safety on red. He kept well back from the shoulder, back on the pavement, beyond a sudden lunge and swipe from scythe or lazy-boy.

The looks that came his way did not bother him; he was long used to being the old devil. There wasn't any sense to that hatred; *he* hadn't put the boys in stripes. But he didn't blame them. Human souls in their fix had to hate somebody, and the wise men who'd sent them up weren't around.

THE DeSoto Trail was a main route, and cars were thick on it that December day. Mostly sleek cars from the North, Miami bound. Slowed down by the traffic flags and their own bug-eyed curiosity, they crept past at a parade crawl, rubbernecking.

"Oh look—a chain gang!" . . . "Where are your bloodhounds, Legree?" . . . "Eddie, throw the poor boys your cigarettes."

Captain Bo didn't know who this Legree fellow was, but he gathered that the man was a heller. Except to see that none of the cars stopped and got chummy with his gang, he paid no attention to tourists. His job was to find and splosh trouble.

The gang's twenty-odd black boys, schooled up, were slinging down weeds and trimming the spaced palms. Despite different tasks they were working in rhythm, and a song was going, in low slow cadence. A song always meant no trouble, so Captain Bo passed them by.

Halfway down the line big Ox Odon was putting the scythe to a patch of lemon grass. Captain Bo's scrutiny halted on Odon. Ordinarily a happy-go-lucky youngster, Ox was tying into the grass with savage swipes; he was lathered with sweat, and his mouth twitched.

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Ox's partner, Doon Miller, was likewise out of gear. But Doon wasn't registering it with his rake. Wide-legged, turned to stone, Doon was staring down the Trail. The expression on his hard young face wasn't hate, wasn't violent sickness. Captain Bo didn't know what is was, except that it was violent.

He plodded on to the far end of the line and then back to the pair. There, plain as a bug in your grits, was the trouble, or the storm center of it. Doon and Ox.

Captain Bo hated to see Doon cracking, whatever the cause. In that sorry company Doon Miller was a standout. Five years on the gang had not broken him. The lifetime more he faced had not killed his spirit.

Full of hum as a banjo string, Doon had done wonders with the bit of influence given a trusty. He sparkplugged the whole gang. Only twenty-six, he bossed the old bitter recidivists, the neanderthal throw-backs, the newcome youngsters who still cried at night.

The outfit liked him, and he got things done that guards and chopper guns could never do.

The sanitary squad, which kept the stockade like a hound's tooth, was Doon's idea. Likewise the bountiful stockade gardens, desperately needed because most of the appropriations for grub went into another trough. Before Doon's time the trusties used to cruise around cutting down cabbage palms for the insipid "palm heart." Now the gang ate.

The library, weekly movie, central radio, mosquito-bane flowers—these stemmed from Doon, though Frank helped with the ways and means.

What made the youngster tick was a a mystery to Captain Bo. Some lifers withered away and died inside. Others lived only for *der Tag*, escape. Doon was of neither sort. He faced his reality squarely. A practical person, he built with earthly bricks, like yams, clean beds, shower baths. But the puzzle remained: why did he build at all?

Captain Bo ordered, "You, Doon—fall out."

DOON turned around slowly. It was like a man coming back to life. He walked out upon the pavement and stopped at the regulation eight feet from the rifle muzzle.

"What can I do for you, Nail Soup?" He had smoothed out his face and recovered his insolent good humor.

"You kin keep yourself from gittin' plugged, mebbe."

Doon put on bewilderment. "Me? Now what?"

"I ain't carin' what. I'm only sayin' you're fixin' to git yourself a bellyful of slugs." He patted his chopper gun.

Doon said, "Regular old hell-cat, aren't you?"

On occasions, Captain Bo suspected that Doon and Frank too, considered him an old huff and puff. That wouldn't go on a gang. To be wicked and feared kept down breaks.

He gestured with his rifle. "Git back to your rake. You been warned. Take it er leave it."

Back at the head of the line a Pennsylvania car with two couples in it had stopped alongside Frank, for a little condescending. That was their mistake. Frank was pouring it into them like a machine-gun burst.

"It's movie and sob-story gush, this 'southern chain gang' stuff. We're not a whisky-damn bit worse than the rest of the country, though that's rotten enough. 'Atrocities'? How about you? How about that batch of prisoners you Brotherly Lovers steam-baked to

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death? Is that the custom up your way? Neither is atrocity with us."

Then followed some remark Captain Bo didn't catch, but it was about himself, for Frank ran another burst, even hotter:

"An old butcher, hunh, carrying a chopper gun? What d'you think he'd carry, a lollypop? Hell, man, he's riding herd on killers. Look. In his twenty-five years at it he's been knifed, clubbed, shot full of holes—and he's never plugged a man yet!"

Captain Bo didn't like praise. It made him feel like a hypocrite. Compared to what the Book asked a man to be, he knew he was pretty low-down and had lived a mean sinful life.

He walked into the argument. "Turn it off, Frank. You folks git along. You'll be late fer cocktails."

Frank inquired, "Spot any trouble, chief?"

"It's Doon. He's crackin'."

"What? *Doon?*"

"Him an' Ox."

Frank said: "Now, chief. You know Doon can't be cracked. He's just off feed, somehow."

Captain Bo did not argue. He pulled out a fat gunmetal watch. "Half hour yit, but blow your whistle, Frank. We got to dig them yams 'fore slop time. Doon says the field rats are gittin' into 'em bad. Lemme watch how you load a gang in the vans."

He lighted the stub of a cigar and eyed the row of men standing roughly at attention. "About Doon. Put a special on him. He does everything in a big way."

IN THE whippoorwill dark of eight o'clock Captain Bo sat alone in the stockade office, signing requisition lists which Frank and Doon had made out. The yams had been harvested, supper had come and gone, and all but the trusties, cleaning up odds and ends, were under lock.

The special guard shadowing Doon had not reported, which meant there was nothing to report.

Captain Bo finished the requisitions and leaned back wearily, a boot on his desk. He felt bone tired, and the aches lingering from that April fracas were pestering him, dully.

As usual when he was alone his thoughts swung around to his job and the ax about to fall. What with skimpy pay, kick-backs to superiors, and out-of-pocket contributions for items the stockade simply had to have, he had saved about as many dollars as his years of gang bossing.

No pension, family, friends; and that feeling of having had something shot out of him—it was a bad corner. Frank's young vigor, Frank's school-learning about the new penal ways, made him feel like an old conch on a mud flat. He knew but one work, and he no longer could handle that.

"Might mebbe hold up some fillin' station an' git put on a gang," he thought. "They eat'n sleep."

He heard footsteps on the shell walk outside. Some man was running toward the office. He reached for the gun at his belt. Frank barged through the door.

"It's Ox, chief. He got socked."

Captain Bo picked up a flash and followed Frank out. "Socked?" as they headed across the quadrangle. "A fight?"

"No. Rattler. Over by the pyrethrum beds. Ox and Doon had just finished their laundry and were going to their cell."

Captain Bo had his suspicions. But at the far side of the quadrangle they left him. Stretched on the grass there,

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big Ox was gasping like a horse with the heaves. Guards and trusties stood gawking, helpless.

In the cells looking down on the scene a riot was getting under way. The yells and bang-whanging sounded like a troop of baboons working up a frenzy. When Captain Bo appeared the headless fury concentrated on him.

As usual, Doon Miller had taken over. He was the only steady one. After fanning a guard for the snake-bite kit, he had slit Ox's trouser leg, lanced the bite, put on a ligature; and was alternately using a suction cup and a purple wash.

Captain Bo leaned down. He'd been socked that way himself once, and it wasn't funny. "Figger he's got a chance, Doon?"

"Depends. You ought to get him to the County on the jump. Keep working this cup and using this permanganate."

Captain Bo straightened up. "Sam, fetch my car. Frank, finish the lockin' up an' go on emergency."

Doon filled a hypo syringe and handed it to Captain Bo. "Give Ox this now. Tell the doc it was one-half an adult shot."

He faced the cells. "You apes, lay off. You're just hurting Ox's chances. Hell, fellows, it wasn't old Nail Soup that bit Ox, after all." He turned away, for his own cell.

Captain Bo halted him. "Hold on, you. I never messed with a needle."

Sam drove the old car alongside. They laid Ox on the back seat. Captain Bo flipped his belt gun at Doon. "Crawl in. I drive, you 'tend him. Frank, set on the lid here."

He eased the car through the stockade gates and whipped down the shell road to the Trail. The traffic was thick and high-speed. Seeing no hole, he braked to a full stop.

A gun muzzle prodded the back of his neck. "Sorry, chief." It was Doon's voice, very steady, like the automatic in his hand. "Just relax."

OX REACHED over the seat and took Captain Bo's belt gun. Ox whisked off the tourniquet and threw the suction cup out the window. Captain Bo saw this by the rear-view mirror, and he knew then how things were.

Doon had got himself a car, guns, hostage and a jump of half the night.

"Slide over," Doon bade. "I drive now. Don't forget Ox has a gun."

Captain Bo slid over. Doon found a hole in the traffic and headed south, pushing the pedal to the boards.

"Hated to make a sucker of you, chief," Doon apologized. "Double that; you were thinking to save Ox."

Captain Bo didn't mind being made a sucker. But—the thought nearly jolted the nails out of his boots—this break meant his finish, smack bang. Just the right excuse for a bounce, without even notice pay. Frank would try to cover up the mistake, but too many others had seen. All those apes—

"You'n Ox are the suckers," he grunted at Doon. "When they nab you, it'll be pen an' solitary, 'stead of bein' trusties on a nice outdoors chain gang. Headin' fer Miamy fer to hide in, an' with stripes on—you're crazy."

Ox lighted cigarettes for Doon, himself, their prisoner. Captain Bo needed his, what with the ax business and Doon's mad driving. He mopped his face and unbuttoned his jacket.

That driving made his skin crawl. Doon was hurling the old car down the Trail at sixty an hour. The way he wove in and out, escaping head-on smashes by fender paint, was like a movie thriller of a crazy car on the tear.

Doon said, skidding around a truck:

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"Not Miami. Xanadu, forty miles down this drag: that's us, chief. I ought to break the news that Ox and I are counting on you to help us in this smash play."

"He'p you? *Me?* I'll blow your teeth out your ears."

Doon was not impressed. "I picked you to come along, Captain Bo, because Frank wouldn't do, or any of the others. They haven't got your backbone. They'd look out first for their jobs and reputations."

"Doon, I'm warnin' you; I'll blow—" He dropped it, flat. No use; Doon had his number. Besides, they had a gun on him. He felt he might as well be sociable.

"Mind sayin' what bitten you this afternoon, Doon?"

"AN AUTOMOBILE," Don answered. "Crawling past the gang. A swank car with all the trimmings: dame, chauffeur and little fluff dog. It drove us crazy."

"That don't add up to nothin' to me."

"It will. About the car. I remembered the license number, and this evening, in the stockade office, I phoned the sheriff and got the dope on that car. But I'd guessed already. Ever been to Xanadu, chief?"

"I've druve past."

"Ox and I used to own that spread, Captain Bo. We were just kids, bumming around the state. That place was just forty acres of worthless cabbage-palm jungle when we found it. We bought it for taxes.

"While I held down a job in Fort Pierce for money, Ox here cut paths and strung lights back into the caves and that weird lake. Nights and Sundays we both worked. It was our oyster, and a gold mine if we could only get the customers started coming in.

"Then, one day, big news. This De-Soto Trail. The survey actually nicked a corner off our forty acres. All that rich Miami traffic—ours!"

"Then what?"

Doon flipped his cigarette out the window. "Why then, Ox and I cracked that Fort Pierce bank, shot the cop and got sent up for life."

Captain Bo chewed on his mustache. Groping around in his rusty memories, he recalled that Doon and Ox had been arrested with the gun and a bit of the money on them. Why in sin had those two turned criminal just when their oyster had popped wide open?

They skimmed past a scatter of juke joints which beset the rich Xanadu like jackals around a lion at its feasting. Doon began slowing.

Captain Bo remarked: "As I see it, whuther you'n Ox done that job ain't the p'int. The court says you done it. What you need is court proof you didn't."

"That's it," Doon said. "And all Hell needs is air conditioning."

"Hunh? Is your chances all that slim?"

"That case is dead and five years buried."

Captain Bo stared in bewilderment at the tense, grim young fellow.

"Then what's the idee of tonight?"

"A lifer will grab at most anything, Captain Bo. I don't have to tell *you* that."

He swung off the Trail into a royal-palm drive. Lights off, he glided the hundred yards to the gates of Xanadu, the car dark and noiseless.

The rustic gates were closed. Doon motioned with the automatic, and Captain Bo climbed over. Ox and Doon followed, and the three of them stood within the grounds.

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THE moon had inched up out of the Atlantic, blood-red. Mockingbirds were singing in the plumosas. Visible from the Trail, a large neon hand pointed to *Alph, the Sacred River*. Another, to *The Sunless Sea*.

To his right Captain Bo saw the dim outlines of pagoda-like buildings which he guessed were dwellings of guides and caretakers. To his left he saw a big lighted residence, also in pagoda style, and the Japanese lanterns of a garden. Where the owner lived, he imagined.

Ox was staring around with awed eyes. "Lord, Doon, can this be the cabbage jungle you and me—?"

Doon snapped him out of it. "Go balmy some other time. When we're back in solitary. You two stay here. Get into cover."

He faded into the moon shadows of a great bearded oak and headed for the main residence. Ox led Captain Bo into the concealing dark of a camphor tree.

"Here, chief," he said, handing Captain Bo his gun. "You'll need this on our next move."

Captain Bo blinked at the weapon. "You two, you don't make sense. Fust you take my gun, then you hand it back."

"Doon's idea. He figured you'd string along with us once you got tangled in our play."

"That Doon," Captain Bo growled, "is a mite too smart."

"Another thing, chief," Ox said, "Doon and I know about this job business, the bad hole you're in. You were always decent to us, on the gang. Look—if we win tonight you win too."

Captain Bo didn't know exactly what Ox meant, but the words, the warm friendliness of them, made him feel less alone. A faint bit like having two boys of his own.

In a few minutes Doon reappeared from the oak shadows. Ox hissed at him and he came over to the camphor.

It was easy to see Doon was excited, but his control held.

"The layout's better than I hoped," he reported. "They're alone in the garden. That makes our chance one in a thousand. It was one in a million to start with. Let's be ankling."

Captain Bo shook a very befuddled head. "How about tellin' a man what he's gittin' dragged into, Doon? How's this trick goin' to unwind?"

"Chief, I don't know that myself. You'll just have to watch, and follow the turns. Ox will give you your cues."

Keeping to the shadows, Doon led the way toward the garden. Through the dwarf jacarandas and punk trees Captain Bo glimpsed a fountain playing, a bloom of many-colored mist like a great night flower.

Nearer, he saw a man and a woman at a lawn table just beyond reach of the spray. They were dawdling over a drink.

"That's Butch," Doon whispered. "Ox and I didn't know he was in the state or even alive. And all the time he was only forty miles away."

The man, in yacht togs, looked about the age of Ox and Doon; but he seemed restless and snappish. Captain Bo tried to remember where he'd seen that sourpuss before. Oh, yes. That afternoon. In a shiny car crawling past the gang. That would be the car which bit Doon and Ox.

Doon halted behind a jasmine trellis about twenty feet from the pair.

"From here on I go it alone," he said. "Now remember, Ox, don't wilt, don't jump the gun. Let me cut that knot or get shot." He straightened up and walked out into the periphery of light from the fountain.

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AT sight of him, convict clothes and a gun in his hand, the woman screamed. There was a tinkle of thin glass shattering as the man jumped up.

"Hello, Butch," Doon greeted. "I seem to surprise you. Man, didn't you know I'd come back some day?"

Butch kept still. The first jolt past, he was getting hold of himself quickly. He looked like an ugly customer, cool and brainy as Doon. Captain Bo noticed him dart a quick glance at the walking stick leaning against his chair.

Doon bowed to the woman. "Miller is the name, lady. You wouldn't have heard of me or Ox Odon, of course. Naturally Butch wouldn't broadcast the fact that two old-time partners of his were on a chain gang. But it's so. In the lean days Ox and I cut Butch in on Xanadu because he had dog-track connections that meant trade for us."

"Mary," Butch said, "this poor chap used to work for me when I was chopping Xanadu out of the scrub. He's stir-crazy and imagines—"

Doon cut him off. "What a partner Butch made, Mary! Why, when Ox and I were in jail, he fought for us like wildcats. To raise lawyer money he even sold this place—so Ox and I heard, and for five years believed."

Captain Bo's mouth fell open. Things were beginning to add up. At least he understood what had hit Doon that afternoon. Doon and Ox, lifers, on a chain gang, while their one-time partner lived free as sunshine, drinking his glut of the good things—that would crack any man.

And that wasn't the half the story. Not the real nub of it at all.

Doon stepped closer to Butch. Much too close, Captain Bo observed. Doon looked to be caving in, under the pressure. His gun hand was shaking; he didn't seem to see the walking stick.

"Butch"—he dropped the double talk—"I never did understand how that gun and money got planted on Ox and me. Start explaining." The trigger safety of his automatic made a metallic little snick.

Captain Bo felt like a punctured balloon. So this was Doon's smash play. This was all the brains Doon had. A gun-point confession. Didn't he know that any court would throw that out like a dead rat?

"Hurry it up, Butch," Doon ordered. "You're going to know what it feels like to be a lifer. Ox and I are going to get back this Xanadu, that you swindled—"

MARY had edged close to Butch, right against his shoulder, for protection from the convict with a gun. With a sweep of his arm Butch suddenly slammed her against Doon. Before Doon could recover, the stick arched back.

The blow caught Doon on his right arm, just above the wrist. The gun dropped from his limp hand. He stooped to grab the weapon but Butch kicked him in the face, knocked him backward, and scooped up the automatic.

"Stand still, Doon! Mary, go in and phone the sheriff's office. Tell them to get a squad here in a hurry."

Ox's teeth were chattering now. "W-watch this part c-close, c-chief. D-d-doon's hanging b-by a h-hair."

When Mary was gone, Butch said: "I just didn't want her to see me bump you, Miller. They're squeamish that way. A convict on the loose is fair game, you know. I'm glad you came. From now on I won't wake up at night worrying about you. With you alive I never could feel absolutely easy. It was a bad disappointment when they

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didn't burn you and Ox, five years ago. So—"

The gun came up to level.

Doon's voice was weary and beaten. "I guess you win again, Butch. You were born lucky."

"Luck? It was brains. And the nerve to grab this." His gesture meant the forty acres of Xanadu. "You had brains enough, Miller, but no backbone."

"If that's backbone," Doon retorted, "thank the Lord I haven't got any. You're something out of the jungle, fellow."

"Same old Doon," Butch taunted. "Same old Sunday-school prattle. In this life you've got to grab what you want or you don't get it; you wind up behind the eight ball—or on a chain gang."

The hard, mocking voice held complete assurance now. The fleet black eyes were triumphant. But Doon met this stare and began calmly to speak.

"A person could wind up worse. You, for instance. Behind that poker face, you're a soured, worm-eaten crab-apple. In these last five years I did more living on a chain gang than you've done with all this. Laugh."

Butch did laugh. Captain Bo didn't. He remembered how alive and busy Doon had kept, in his work for the other prisoners. There was the key to Doon! He had goodwill and he ticked, even on a chain gang. Butch didn't have it and he didn't tick, even with Xanadu.

Butch's hand was tightening on the grip safety of the automatic. Captain Bo couldn't stand it, and he leveled his gun at Butch. But Ox grabbed his wrist.

"N-not y-yet, chief. It's unwinding r-right, like D-doon figured it. B-but watch—oh, L-lord, watch it close!"

Doon was looking at Butch's gun, not knowing what moment death would flash out of it, yet standing steady and cool. Captain Bo had seen nerve, in his time, but never the beat of that.

"Look," Doon said. "I know you wanted Xanadu all for yourself, Butch, but why did you have to frame Ox and me? Like a butcher bird sticking live things on thorns, you hung Ox and me up for life. Why didn't you just bump us?"

"Too dangerous," Butch said. "It would have looked suspicious. Besides, I needed quick slush to get this place going. When you tried to raise a loan at that bank, that's what gave me the idea. So I cracked the bank, got the slush, got shut of you and Ox—all with one move! It was a walk-over."

Ox shoved at Captain Bo. "Get out there! He's untied the knot! You heard him."

Captain Bo hurried onto the scene. "You, Butch! Drop the gun."

IT WAS a fatal mistake, his going into the light. Doon and Ox had not figured that move to a razor edge, as they had all the other moves. He should have stayed behind the trellis and given Butch a disarming slug through the shoulder. Old and slow, he was no match for the quick brains of the young man.

Doon lunged at Butch but he was too late. The automatic had already swung on Captain Bo and flashed twice; and was swinging on Doon again.

Captain Bo stumbled, clutching at his belt. But he was tough, and the two slugs did not knock him over. His gun flashed back. In twenty-five years he had never killed a man, but now he shot for the heart, to silence that automatic.

He stopped shooting only when,

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against the many colored mist, he saw Butch fold up and go down.

Then Captain Bo felt himself swaying, crumpling, and it took an enormous effort of will to hold erect.

"Chief!" It was Doon's voice. "You're hurt!"

"Ain't—much." Captain Bo buttoned up his jacket, to hide the spreading crimson on his cotton shirt. He'd been shot up enough to know when he'd got his. "He'p me to that chair, Doon."

"Ox! He's hard hit. Let's get him to the County on the jump."

"I stay here," Captain Bo said stubbornly. He knew he had to stay, meet the sheriff's squad and tell them what he'd been witness to, or Ox and Doon's knot would go uncut. "Ain't budgin', I tell you."

Ox's strong arms led him to the chair. Doon grabbed the unbroken liquor glass and brought water from the fountain pool. That helped. Far away in the night Captain Bo heard a siren, coming nearer; and that, also, helped. The fountain lights, the gay Japanese lanterns were dimming; but he knew he could hold on long enough.

A queer sort of peace was creeping into him. He couldn't figure it. He felt glad about Ox and Doon and Xanadu, but that wasn't it.

After his years of gang bossing, he was glad to have done somebody a goodness; but that, still, wasn't it.

As by a sharp wind from the skies some nightmare was being blown away. He finally understood. The ax. No old jalopy on the junk pile now.

Doon's smash play had sure cut that knot too.

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The Sun Sets At 5

Guns boomed. As Smooth dropped, Rags fired. It was like old times

By BORDEN CHASE

IN THE good old days of Broadway's heyday, SMOOTH KYLE, who drove a hack faster and better than any other cabbie on the stem, could never have guessed that one day, single-handed, he would be called upon to protect his country's most precious military secret and battle the most brilliantly organized espionage ring in the world. Nor that GILDA GARLAND, the smart, hard-witted blonde who tyrannized and adored him, would endanger all his plans right at the most crucial point in the case.

But that's about the way it turned out, for Smooth quit his cab, joined the Treasury Department, and after a brilliant, hard-hitting career, found himself in full combat with the master spy and saboteur known only as Center.

At the Club Yvonne, tipped off to them as an important link in the espionage chain, Smooth and Gilda meet a group of dangerously single-minded individuals. These include NADJA SHERENE, beautiful Viennese star who has made a hit in Hollywood; FREDERICK, the club's mysterious maitre d'hotel; OTTO BERGEN, more mysterious waiter and obviously one of Center's busiest message bearers; and MARIE ROUBARD, the vivacious little band-leader.

This story began in the Argosy for March 2

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GRADUALLY the bits of the puzzle fit together; through happenings violent and dramatic, emerge the outlines of a plot to steal the Army's newest and most powerful offensive weapon, a recently perfected bomb-sight. Nadja Sherene is to discover from LIEUTENANT HODKINS, who will pilot the test flight, the hour of the takeoff; and MARK HESSON, ex-gambler and now part owner of a shipping line is to hold a freighter and a sea-going tug in readiness for orders. Both Nadja and Mark insist that they are being forced to do the work, and promise to let Smooth know the instant when the final orders are issued. Smooth agrees to string along with them, confident that he can halt the freighter before Center and the bomb-sight will have passed the twelve-mile limit.

Smooth also discovers that Center plans to wreck the test-flight plane and force it down at sea, where the bomb-sight will be removed, placed aboard the tug and transferred to the freighter. Center has tried to force a stubbornly loyal mechanic, named ENGEL, to bring about the crackup by placing a small time bomb on the plane. Smooth, anxious that Center's scheme progress to its final move without a hitch, persuades Engel to plant the bomb.

BY A little fast second-story work, Smooth gains access to Marie Roubard's apartment in search of more information; and Gilda finds him there.

Marie Roubard meanwhile has told Smooth that she is a French agent, just as Frederick was a British counter-espionage man, and tries to persuade Smooth to withdraw from the case, fearing for his life.

And that is where Gilda, skeptical of both Nadja and Marie's stories, tosses her monkey wrench into the proceedings.

SHE and Broadway columnist DAVE HALEY arrange a meeting with LIEUTENANT LYONS, who is to fly with Hodkins. They tell him Smooth's plan, and, fearing that the scheme might endanger the bomb-sight, Lyons balks and threatens to expose the plot to his superiors.

Before Smooth can quiet Lyons down, Hesson telephones to let Smooth know that the freighter is to sail early in the morning. Another call, this time from Nadja, warns Smooth that the flight is to start at dawn and that she has passed this information on to Center.

Smooth, sharply aware that he still has to win his battle with Gilda and Lieut. Lyons and none too sure that he will be able to swing it, can only hope that he'll get a zero-hour break. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

BLITZKRIEG BEFORE CARNEGIE

HE HUNG up and left the booth. As he walked toward the table he felt as though he had started a stone rolling at the top of a snow-covered mountain. Almost, he could see it gathering size and weight as it turned over and over, building into an avalanche as it rolled. No use trying to stop it. No use trying to slow its pace. All he could do now was to run with it.

Gilda was smiling when he pulled back his chair. So was Haley. Even Lieutenant Lyons seemed to have lost his grouch. Smooth looked at each of them in turn and got ready for trouble. He opened his mouth to tell Lyons a few more things that had come to mind but Gilda beat him to the first word.

"Settle down, handsome," she said. "Dave Haley asked a question that ruined the whole argument."

"What was it?" asked Smooth.

Gilda's teeth worried her lower lip. She looked at Smooth as though she were a little ashamed of herself. "He asked if you'd done anything to cover yourself if you weren't able to grab Center on the *Malay Princess*."

"Who said I expected to grab Center?" asked Smooth. "I'm not even going near the *Malay Princess* until she's fifty miles past Ambrose Light on her way to England. Then I'll go aboard with an escort."

"How?" said Haley.

"Oh, just an old Navy custom," said Smooth. "When Nadja tipped me to the setup I passed the word along to Buckley and Whitman. They made arrangements to have a few destroyers waiting for the *Malay Princess*. And now I'll get in touch with the Brooklyn Navy Yard and have them send me

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out to watch the fun." He turned to Lyons and grinned. "Does that make you feel any better, Lieutenant?"

"Much better," said Lyons. "Sorry I went off the handle, old man."

"So am I," said Gilda. She reached across the table and put her hand on Smooth's arm. "I'd forgotten you had reported to Buckley and Whitman. Things were breaking so fast I must have gotten confused. Are we friends again, darling?"

"Who could stay angry with you?" asked Smooth. He reached into his pocket for cigarettes, couldn't find them, and helped himself to one from Gilda's case. "Now that we're organized, I think Lieutenant Lyons better get back to Mitchell Field or the whole thing will go sour."

"No chance of that," said Lyons. "Hodkins would leave without me at seven." He looked up at the clock. "It's about time I started, though."

Haley stood up. "Before you all get away from me, let me call my paper and tell them to hold some space. If this thing breaks at seven o'clock, I want first crack at it." He turned to Smooth. "Where can I meet you when it's over?"

"We'll probably bring Center in to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Why not meet us there?"

"Great!" said Haley. "Just wait until I tell the editor to expect some front page stuff."

He hurried across the restaurant and stepped into the phone booth. Gilda folded the road maps, put one in the rack with the menu and asked for a pencil. Lieutenant Lyons handed his across the table and Gilda wrote rapidly along the margin of the map. She returned the pencil to Lyons, put the second map in the menu-rack and looked meaningly at Smooth.

It hadn't taken a moment and it was typical of things Gilda had often done when she and Smooth worked together. Something was due to break. Something Gilda had planned. Smooth felt his nerves draw taut. He watched Gilda open her vanity case, dab powder on her nose and tuck a loose strand of hair over one of her small ears. Almost, it was as though he were watching a man take off his coat, roll up his sleeves and get ready for action.

DAVE HALEY came back to the table. He put out his hand to Lieutenant Lyons and grinned. "Lots of luck, mister. I'm glad you're flying that plane—not me."

Lyons laughed. "I'm not half as worried about the plane as I am about my car."

"Why?" asked Smooth. "What's wrong with your car?"

"Nothing's wrong with it," said Lyons. "But it's been parked outside the restaurant for hours."

"Don't worry about that," said Haley. "I spoke to the cop when we came in. You won't get a ticket—take my word for it." He turned to Gilda and pulled back her chair as she stood. "I'm going to the Navy Yard and wait for the payoff. Can I give you a lift?"

"I'm going home," said Gilda firmly. "You can take me as far as Madison Avenue, if you'd like. I've done all I can tonight—or rather, this morning. I'll read about the rest of it in your column, Dave."

"It'll be there," promised Haley. He turned to Smooth. "Are you coming to the Yard with me?"

Smooth started to answer but Gilda interrupted. "You'd better wait and see McNeary. I told him you'd be here in Lindy's, Smooth. He wants to see you."

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Smooth was impatient. "But how can I wait? I've got to see Nadja, and Mac may not get here for hours."

"He's flying up from Washington," said Gilda. "He'll be here any minute. You be an angel and see him after you talk with Nadja." She shook hands with Lyons, wished him luck and put her arm through Haley's. As she left the table, she turned and pointed to the road maps. "Oh, Smooth! Don't forget to give those maps back to the hackman. And watch out for the horse cars and bicycles when you cross Broadway, Handsome. G'bye, now."

Lieutenant Lyons smiled to Gilda and Haley as they left, then turned to Smooth and put out his hand. "Here's hoping everything goes well," he said. "There are a dozen more questions I'd like to ask but I'm afraid I'll have to hurry along."

Smooth glanced at the clock. It lacked a few minutes of five. Gilda was chatting with a friend at one of the forward tables as Haley paid the check at the cashier's desk. Soon both of them went through the revolving door and walked toward a taxi. Lyons put on his uniform cap, and started to leave the table.

"Hold it, Lieutenant," said Smooth. He reached for the road maps, opened one and glanced at the message Gilda had written.

"Anything the matter?" asked Lyons.

"Everything's the matter!" said Smooth. "Listen to this!" He read Gilda's message quietly: "If Lieutenant Lyons gets back to Mitchell Field alive, I'm wrong. If anyone tries to kill him on the way—*I've got Center!* Period, paragraph! Send some of Rags Donovan's men with Lyons as a convoy. Get the men who try to kill him, but keep them alive. Be sure to wait for McNeary, and try to be careful. I love you, smarty-pants."

Lyons looked at Smooth in bewilderment. "But I don't understand it," he said. "None of it makes sense."

"Only the last sentence."

"That's ridiculous! Of course she loves you, but—"

"That's just the trouble, feller," said Smooth wearily. He folded the map and put it into his pocket. "I know she loves me. I'm pretty crazy about her, too. But we don't waste time telling each other about it unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Skip it," said Smooth. "It's time for you to get rolling."

"But what does it mean?" Lyons insisted.

"Oh, it just means Gilda is playing a thousand-to-one shot and she knows those things don't often come through. It also means that when you start back to Mitchell Field, you're making the most dangerous trip you've ever been on. You can bow out now if you want. If you think you're tough—play it through. Either way suits me."

"I'm going back to the field!" said Lyons firmly. "I've *got* to go back!"

SMOOTH motioned to him and hurried toward the door. He stepped onto the street, moved out of the flare of light that came from the restaurant window and stood with his back to the building wall. Lyons stood with him.

"That your car?" Smooth pointed to a green roadster that stood at the curb.

"Yes," said Lyons. "Shall I start back to the field now?"

"Not yet."

Smooth nodded to a dark figure that stood near a building entrance at the corner. The figure came slowly toward him, and the rays of a street light touched the green shirt and yellow tie

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of Rags Donovan. He moved in beside Lyons and looked inquiringly at Smooth.

"Somethin' you want?"

"Yes," said Smooth. "Gilda tells me they've put the finger on Lieutenant Lyons. That's his car at the curb and he's got to get back to Mitchell Field in one piece—but fast! We want the guys who try to grab him. Alive!"

"A detail," said Rags casually. "Nothin' but a mere detail. Consider it done, Smooth. Ask the lieutenant to be so kindly as to wait one minute. I'll make all arrangements in person."

He moved out of the doorway and Lyons looked at Smooth. "Who is he?" asked the flier.

"A machine gun that got pointed the wrong way when it was young," said Smooth.

He watched Donovan cross the street; saw him pause for a moment at a building entrance and walk on to the next. There was another pause. Rags continued to the corner, recrossed Broadway and hurried toward them. Two groups of figures walked to the curb and stepped into parked taxis. One cab rolled north and slowed to a stop. The second made a fast U-turn and drew up behind the roadster.

"Everything is under control," said Rags softly. He smiled at Lyons. "You will please to climb into your jalopy an' be on your merry way. Follow the cab that's waitin', and if you hear any shots ignore them completely, as it were."

Smooth laughed and shook hands with the flier. "Lots of luck, feller," he said. "Cross your fingers and start rolling."

Lyons wanted to ask questions. He looked sharply at Smooth and then at Rags. Neither seemed anxious to explain. He shrugged, walked to the car and started the motor. As he swung out from the curb the second taxi fell into line. Smooth caught a quick flash of the driver's face. It was worried. Very worried. Three men sat in the rear seat. Hard men. If Smooth had been on the front end of that hack he would have been worried, too.

"An' what would be next on the program?" asked Rags softly.

"We're going to visit a lady. It's five o'clock and she's expecting me at her penthouse."

"Then she ain't no lady," said Rags. "If I had a gal like Gilda, you wouldn't see me visitin' kitchens and penthouses. For a fact, you shoulda seen Gilda when she heard the finger was on you. Like a crazy one! She's a good kid, Smooth—but the best!"

"This is business, Rags."

"My error. Please to lead the way an' we'll visit this here damsel. What's her address?"

"The Van Ness Apartments on Central Park South. We'll walk."

They went north to Fifty-third Street, crossed Broadway and hurried through the short block to Seventh Avenue. It was dark here. Only an occasional lighted window broke the gloom on the west side of the avenue. Across the street was the dark wall of storage house, strangely out of place so close to Times Square. But Smooth wanted darkness. He glanced over his shoulder and saw two men following as he made for the shadows.

"Yours?" he asked.

"Mine," said Rags. "Some more behind them."

They kept walking. Fifty-fourth, Fifty-fifth, and as Smooth reached the broad sidewalk at the rear of Carnegie Hall, Rags caught his shoulder, twisted him half around and pushed. Smooth tripped and went to his knees. A gun

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flared and a bullet split the glass in one of the doors.

"Keep down!" yelled Rags. His gun was out, tearing the night with quick flashes. "Watch the side street, Smooth. I'll take the avenue!"

CHAPTER XXVII

FEMALE WITH GUN

SMOOTH looked into the darkness of Fifty-sixth Street. Two men had stepped from behind a parked car and were lining their guns at shoulder height. Deliberate. Aiming as though at a mark. Smooth tried to quick one. Then another. He heard Rags' gun join in the chorus. Further down Seventh Avenue another pair of guns came to life.

"Fifty grand is a lot of money," said Rags thoughtfully. He moved back until his shoulder touched Smooth's. "Feller—you're hot! Plenty hot!"

"You're telling me?" said Smooth. He tried again and saw a man go down "How are you fixed for shells?"

"What size?"

"Thirty-eights."

"Put your hand in my coat pocket but be careful of the garment. These imported clothes tear easily."

Smooth reached back, watching the side street as he tried to grab a handful of cartridges. The guns on the avenue chattered and then the rising wail of a siren sounded in Times Square.

"Time to go!" said Rags.

He pointed toward a cab that had stopped on Seventh Avenue. The driver was looking about in confusion. He wanted out but didn't know which way to drive. Rags helped him decide. He nudged Smooth's elbow, bent low and sprinted toward the taxi. Smooth followed and jumped into the rear when Rags pulled open the door.

"Roll!" cried Rags. He pushed his gun against the back of the hackman's neck.

The cab leaped forward.

"Where to?" asked the frightened driver.

"The way you're heading," said Smooth. "Swing east at the Park and slow it down before you get to Sixth."

"Tell him to take that gun out of my neck," said the driver. "I ain't goin' to argue—honest, mister."

"He says he's not going to argue," said Smooth.

"Now fancy that," said Rags. He lowered the gun and grinned at Smooth. "You still keepin' that date?"

"Why not?"

"You're sort of wrinkled at the edges. Maybe you'd like to drive up to my place and change the raiment? I got a very nice pincheck worsted that'd fit you good, Smooth. Imported, no less."

"Sorry, Rags—haven't time just now." Smooth tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Slow it down, pal. When we get out, keep rolling. Here's a fin for your trouble."

He tucked a bill into the collar of the driver's coat, opened the door and landed running. Rags followed. They sprinted to the curb, crossed the wide walk and stepped into a doorway. A radio car screamed past, heading toward Seventh Avenue. Rags put his fingers to his lips and tossed a kiss after it. Then he looked at the cuff of his coat and shook his head in disgust.

"Ain't that enough to annoy anybody to tears?" he said mournfully. "Fancy that, now. Some mug shot two buttons off my cuff—imported buttons, no less!"

"I'll buy you a dozen buttons if you figure a way to get up to that penthouse. There's a girl at the switchboard in the hall. She works for Cen-

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ter. So does the man on the elevator, probably."

Rags rubbed the barrel of his gun suggestively. "Well—"

"No dice."

"How's about the basement? There's a fire escape in the back. Has to be."

"I owe you the buttons," said Smooth.

HE STEPPED out onto the sidewalk and walked with Rags toward the entrance of the Van Ness Apartments. The wide brass doors were closed and beyond them at the edge of the building was an entry with a short flight of stairs leading down to a passage. A second radio car swung into Fifty-ninth Street as they hurried down the steps. They followed the passage toward the rear, passed two closed doors and climbed another set of steps to the yard. Rags pointed to the fire escape. The lower ladder was just beyond reach. Rags cupped his hands.

"Alley oop!" he whispered.

Smooth stepped into the cupped hands. He climbed to the first balcony and lowered the ladder. Rags joined him and they went carefully up toward the penthouse.

"It would have to be the top," said Rags. "Imagine what my garments will look like!"

Smooth didn't answer. He needed his breath for the climb. He looked at the sky that was still dark, tried to catch the time on his wristwatch but couldn't. The ladder was dirty and each step sent a fine spray of dust down onto Rags. Smooth heard a sigh. Then another. He chuckled and kept climbing. A hedge row lined the rail of the roof. There was a narrow entrance at the top of the ladder. Smooth stepped through it, trying to keep the leaves from rustling as he moved.

"A garden, no less," whispered Rags. He stood beside Smooth and pointed to the carefully tended rows of late autumn flowers. "The very same garden that was here when Joe Chatre had the joint. There's the very bush I stood behind the night I clipped Joe's customers fer thirty grand. Such memories! There was roses bloomin' then. I like roses, don't you, Smooth?"

Smooth laughed. "So that's how you knew about the fire escape, eh?"

"How could I forget? I always meant t'come back an' get another rose, but no one ever opened up a joint like Chatre's so I didn't bother."

Smooth glanced about the garden. It was hard for him to realize Rags Donovan was the gun-crazy killer who had kept most of the gamblers, bootleggers and racketeers on edge during the wet days in New York. But he was.

And now that he had mentioned it, Smooth recalled the story of Rags' last visit to this penthouse. Donovan had come alone, with a gun in each hand and a rose in the lapel of his gaudy coat. He had emptied Chatre's till and not one of the paid guards or gunmen in the place had seen fit to argue with him.

"Stay here," said Smooth, "and keep an eye on the elevator. Center knows I'm due to make this call and he may send a few boys along to keep things interesting."

Rags nodded and moved to a place where he could cover the entrance. Smooth walked quietly to the penthouse. The door was open. He stepped inside and looked about. Two lamps were lit in the large living room and there was a bottle of sherry and two glasses on the coffee table. The air was heavy with the perfume Nadja liked, and a thin haze of cigarette smoke eddied along the ceiling.

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Smooth walked to the table and put his finger on a cigarette butt that was stained with lip-rouge. It was warm. So was another that was not stained. Evidently Nadja had carried out her orders, and Lieutenant Hodkins had left a few moments earlier. Smooth took out his gun and moved quietly to the hall. It was empty and he walked into the adjoining room where he and Nadja had faced each other across the supper table. Beyond was another entrance that opened onto a suite.

HE WALKED to the nearest open door. Nadja was there, dressed in a smart gray tailored suit and turban. She was bending above a small overnight case that was open on the bed. Her back was toward Smooth and she hummed quietly as she packed. A cigarette burned on an ashtray balanced on one of the pillows. Nadja reached for it, drew deeply and turned.

"Going somewhere?" asked Smooth quietly.

"Smooth!" she cried. The cigarette dropped to the rug and she stepped back a pace. "Oh, you startled me!"

"Why? Didn't you expect me?"

"Of course! I left the door open so I would hear the elevator."

SMOOTH walked to the bed. He sat on the edge and looked into the overnight case. There was a small automatic tucked into one of the fitted compartments. He took it out and balanced it on his hand.

"Standard equipment?"

Nadja sat down beside him. "Why are you acting so strangely? What's wrong, Smooth?"

"Oh, just wondering if I've been taken for a sleigh-ride. I'm trying to believe you, but it's getting tougher every minute."

"Why do you say that? Have I done anything that should make you suspect me?" She looked at him intently and her eyes were wide. She moved closer. "I've counted on you, Smooth. You must believe that every word I've told you is truth!"

"That's just the trouble," said Smooth slowly. "It all adds up too nicely. Three days ago I had a puzzle in front of me that no one had been able to put together. Then I met you and the pieces have been jumping into place so fast that I'm dizzy from watching them."

"But surely that's no reason to doubt me," said Nadja. All the suavity had gone from her face and she looked like a frightened child. "I've been waiting for you—hoping you would be able to help me. I tried to tell you new orders had come through. It was impossible to speak any more plainly than I did over that wire, but I gave you the time of the flight and asked you to come here at five."

"Well—I'm here."

Nadaj's hand tightened on his arm and she turned her head away. "You've been talking to Gilda—she's warned you against me. She doesn't like me. Doesn't trust me. And perhaps she's right."

"Is she?"

"Yes," said Nadja. She turned again to look at Smooth and she was smiling now. Her lips were half parted and she held them close to his. "Gilda is a woman and she loves you. I'm a woman, too. We know each other better than any man. We know when we're in danger. Gilda knows it. She knows I like you more than I should, and she's frightened!"

Smooth stood up. He ran one finger along the edge of his collar and stretched his neck. "It may be the

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humidity, Nadja, but I think it's the heat. I don't mind Center's gunmen but—"

"Are you afraid of me?"

"Scared to death! When I turn my back I'm afraid you'll stick a knife in it. When I don't turn my back, I can feel myself slipping. Five minutes more under that sun lamp you use for a smile and I'd believe you if you told me Hitler was sane!"

"But I *am* telling the truth!" she insisted. "Center's agent phoned while Lieutenant Hodkins was here. He gave me instructions and now I'm trying to pass them along to you. Won't you listen, dear?"

"Why not? That's why I came here."

"This is the plan," said Nadja quickly. "One of Center's men is waiting for me with a speedboat at the foot of East Fifty-fourth Street. I'm to meet him there at five-thirty. We overtake a tug in the Narrows and go aboard it at exactly six o'clock. From there—"

"Hold it," said Smooth. "What's the name of the tug?"

"Oh, I don't know, Smooth! I can only tell you what was told to me. After I go aboard the tug it will steam out through the Lower Bay to a point off Rockaway. Hodkins' plane will be brought down and—"

"How?" said Smooth quickly.

SHE shook her hands helplessly. "I don't know, dear. The agent said the plane would be brought down. He didn't say how and I didn't ask him. But I know the men on the tug will take the bomb-sight and the tug will contact the freighter." She paused and caught Smooth's arm. "This is important! The freighter's name is the *Malay Princess*. She's bound for England but Center doesn't intend to let her get there."

"How is he going to stop her?"

"She'll be picked up by a raider, probably. You know what happened to the *City of Flint*—it can happen to the *Malay Princess*."

"And Center will be aboard?"

"Yes."

"Is he aboard now?"

"Of course not!" said Nadja. "He's to smart for that! He'll come aboard from a speedboat when we reach the Lightship at the entrance to the Ambrose Channel."

"You're sure of that?"

"As sure as I can be of anything that's told to me," she said. "All of this is a gamble as far as I'm concerned. I hope it's true but I can't be sure." She pointed toward the overnight case and then toward the small automatic in Smooth's hand. "That's the only insurance I have. Not much, but it may be enough."

Smooth looked at his wristwatch and frowned. "You've got about fifteen minutes to make your first contact, but you can use two of them to give me the angle on that insurance."

"Simply this," said Nadja quickly. "Center has promised to send the radio message that will release my brother as soon as the bomb-sight is delivered to him. Then, according to his plan I was to be returned to the city in the speedboat." She paced quickly across the room, turned and faced Smooth. Her eyes had grown hard and her lips were tight against her teeth. "I don't trust him! I'm afraid to trust him. I'm even afraid to believe you can stop him from getting that bomb-sight to Europe. I'm taking the only way I know to insure that message."

"And that is—"

"I've asked to be allowed to return to Europe, and he has agreed. That means I'll meet Center—actually see

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him aboard the *Malay Princess*. I'll wait until he sends the message or refuses to send it—and then I'll kill him."

Smooth looked at the woman who faced him across the room. He looked at the gun in his hand and tried to think fast. He checked each of the things Nadja had told him with the things he already knew—with things he had learned even in the last hour. It all added up. Every bit of it. Again he asked the question Dave Haley had thrown at Gilda—if Nadja were not on the level, why had she told him all this? And then he laughed.

Nadja Sherene would be the only one to lose in a doublecross. Center might be clever but no man on earth was smart enough to talk his way past a half dozen destroyers and a few Navy planes. Once the *Malay Princess* passed the Ambrose Lightship, Smooth's headaches were over. The destroyers would take the freighter and grab Center cold. If Nadja had been telling the truth, her brother would be in the clear. If not—she could tell it to a military court.

He tossed the small gun into the overnight case, snapped the lid and handed it to Nadja. "You're on your own, wonderful," he said. "Try to keep alive. It's a swell world."

Nadja put the case on a chair. She rested her hands on Smooth's shoulders and looked into his eyes. "I haven't asked how you expect to take Center. I've wanted to, but that is your secret. I'm not going to ask you now." Her arms went about his neck and she pulled his head down to hers. "Be careful, Smooth. I'm afraid you've made another woman love you."

She kissed him then and Smooth liked it. Why lie to himself? Somewhere in the world there might be a man so hard to please that one of Nadja's kisses would leave no impression. Smooth wasn't that tough. Guilty? Oh, he'd feel guilty in a few moments. But not now. Not with Nadja's eyes looking up into his. Not with her lips against his. Smooth didn't complain when his job brought him a shower of bullets. He didn't complain when it brought a kiss from a beautiful woman.

He watched her turn and walk quickly across the room. He shook his head, blinked and stepped out of his dream. There was a door in the bedroom that led to the terrace. He opened it, ran across the gardened roof toward Rags Donovan. He wasn't any too soon. The little gunman was standing behind a tall hedge, his gun lined on Nadja and a quizzical expression on his face as he watched her walk toward the elevator. He lowered his gun and then lifted it again.

"Put it down!" said Smooth quietly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

NICE TRY, SMOOTH

RAGS spun as though he had been standing on a roulette wheel. His gun leveled on Smooth's chest and his eyes went wide. Then he lowered his arm and breathed deeply.

"You'll never know how close you came to heaven, Smooth," he said softly. He grinned and motioned toward the elevator where Nadja was waiting. "You told me not to let any a Center's mob in, but I didn't know if that covered exits, too. The dame had me worried. It's the gentleman in me. I can't seem to crack down on femmes. Especially imports, no less!"

"She's all right," said Smooth. He waited until Nadja had stepped into the elevator and the door had closed. Then he walked toward the front rail of the

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roof. "We've got to get out of here fast, Rags. I'm wondering how many men Center has waiting for us."

"What a mob that bird runs!" said Rags in evident admiration. "With half as many rods I could take over the U.S. Mint, no less!" He looked over the roof rail and pointed to four men who leaned against the stone fence that bordered Central Park. "There's a few, right over there. Two more further down. A convention, I'd call it."

"Let's see how many they've got in the yard."

They walked across the garden to the hedge row at the rear. The first touch of morning was in the sky but the yard below was in darkness. Smooth shrugged and put his foot on the fire escape ladder. Rags moved him aside. Put his own foot on the ladder.

"Allow me, if I may," he said. "Not meanin' to say you're not fast with a gun, Smooth, but it's been rumored hither and about that I'm the fastest in town. Besides, my back is armor-plated. No slug can get through a green shirt, pal."

He started down the ladder before Smooth could offer an objection. When he reached the next landing, Smooth started down after him. Each tried to climb quietly. Each scraped his shoe a dozen times. At length they stood shoulder to shoulder in the yard and looked about. Nothing moved.

"Playin' it safe," said Rags wisely. "Waitin' for us t'come out of the alley." He pointed to the rear fence that blocked off the small court. "How are you on climbin', no less?"

"Not so hot," said Smooth. He rubbed his jaw in remembrance of his last flight over a fence. "I'm perfect going up but bad coming down."

He jumped for the fence top, caught it and pulled himself up. Rags went with him. There was no wire along the rim and Smooth drew his legs over. Rags did likewise. There was the sound of tearing cloth and the little gunman sighed deeply.

"The garment!" he said. "Practically my very best import! Imagine people leavin' nails in a fence. Disgusting, no less!"

He seemed close to tears.

They dropped down into the court at the rear of a tall building, found a passage that led to Fifty-eighth Street and walked west toward Seventh Avenue. At the corner they found a cab. Smooth opened the door and Rags climbed in.

"Lindy's," said Smooth to the driver. "When we get there, hop inside and ask the cashier to call Mr. McNeary. Tell him Kyle is waiting."

"Okay," said the driver. He rolled south.

Smooth leaned back and turned to watch Rags examining his torn trousers. Deep sorrow was written on the man's face. Rags didn't mind when people shot at him. It bothered him little or not at all. But this was different. It was far more important. He spent the next two minutes telling Smooth of the trouble to which he had gone to have the suit made. Imported cloth, no less! And with a war going on, how could a man keep his wardrobe intact if he were careless?

SMOOTH offered condolences. Rags accepted them seriously. He leaned further back in the cab when it stopped near the restaurant and kept his hand near his gun. Smooth grinned. Rags Donovan was probably the hottest man in the country. Federal agents and the police of a dozen cities and states were constantly on the lookout for him. Yet here he sat at five-thirty in the morn-

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ing on Broadway, worried only about a rip in his trousers.

A moment passed and Smooth saw McNeary coming from the restaurant. He walked quickly to the cab, stepped in when Smooth swung open the door, and glanced at Rags Donovan. It must have been a shock but McNeary didn't show it. The driver climbed behind the wheel and rolled south at a word from Smooth.

"Glad to see you, Inspector," said Rags. "Before you reach for the gun, allow me to say I am now incorpolated into the services of Uncle Sammy. We are, I may say, both workin' for the same concern."

"Anything can happen and it won't surprise me," said McNeary. He turned to Smooth and handed him an envelope. "This is for you. It was left with the cashier a few minutes ago. Don't bother with it until you tell me what the hell you're up to. Make it quick!"

Smooth ran through the setup as fast as possible, skimming parts of it but making all of the high points. As McNeary listened two lines between his eyes deepened. At times he cursed silently and hammered one fist against his knee. When Smooth had finished, he put both of his hands against his eyes and held them there for a moment.

"Gilda gave me a little of this over the wire," he said at length. "That's why I'm here. I'd have made it sooner if I could have located Strickland when I arrived. He's downtown now, waiting for a report."

"But I gave him one," said Smooth. "Buckley and Whitman have part of the story. Things have been breaking too fast for me to turn in any more. Wasn't he satisfied with what they told him?"

"Buckley and Whitman were picked up on First Avenue at about three o'clock this morning. Both of them are dead."

Rags Donovan sighed. "What a mob that guy Center runs! What a mob. Practically an organization, no less! How does he meet the payroll, Smooth?"

"T'hell with that!" cried Smooth. He grabbed McNeary's arm and shook it roughly. "Did Buckley and Whitman get it before they saw Strickland? Hasn't he made arrangements to place those destroyers?"

"Strickland hasn't been told anything," said McNeary. He took out his watch and looked at it. "I don't like the setup, Smooth. There's still time to stop that plane from leaving Mitchell Field. In spite of what Gilda told me, I think we'd better cancel the flight."

"What did she tell you?"

"Very little," said McNeary. "She phoned me at Washington, inquired about Hodkins' partner and said you were crazy. I agreed and asked for details. Gilda didn't have time to give them but asked me not to interfere with your plans. She had figured a way to grab Center before the plane took off—something about using Lyons as a plant."

"Lyons?" said Smooth slowly. He tapped the envelope against his chin, looked at it and shook his head. "I can't guess that gal—not ever!"

He opened the envelope and took out a single folded sheet of notepaper. The dome light in the cab was broken but the passing street lights brought the words out clearly. Too clearly! Smooth's throat grew tight as he read: "It wasn't a bad try, Kyle. You were plenty close, and if you've kept alive long enough to read this, it means I've missed you again. You're hard to kill, pal. So hard to kill, I'm afraid you'll

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slip past my men again. That means I need insurance. And I've got it. Gilda made a good try, too. She missed and she's my guest. She'll be with me on the *Malay Princess*. If I get to Europe with the bomb-sight—she gets to Switzerland. Think it over, Smooth. How much do you love your country? How much do you love Gilda? If it were my choice, I'd figure there were plenty of other countries. Best regards —Center."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SUN WILL SET

SMOOTH folded the note and looked out of the cab window. Morning was spreading over Times Square and a cold wind was driving a few small clouds across the sky. It swept down the side of the tall buildings and spun scraps of newspaper and pieces of tinfoil along the gutters. It came through the open window of the cab and touched Smooth's face. He shivered. Not from the coldness of the wind.

"Something wrong?" asked McNeary.

"Yes," said Smooth, and his voice was dull. "I just died, Mac."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

Smooth turned to look at the Inspector. "If I told you I'd just received word the flight was cancelled, would you believe me?"

"Of course."

"Would you go back to Washington and give me six hours to break this case—without asking questions?"

"Why not?" said McNeary in surprise. "I've always trusted you."

"You're making it tough, Chief. With a six-hour start I could get out of this country. In two days I'd be on my way to Switzerland."

He handed the note to McNeary, leaned forward and rested his head on his hands. The cab stopped for a traffic light. Smooth didn't know it. McNeary's face was clouding as he read the note. Smooth didn't know that, either.

He was staring ahead through tightly closed lids at a picture of a girl with light blond hair and laughing eyes. Eyes that could hold all the wisdom of the world and still grow tender when they looked at Smooth.

He saw her walking the bridge of a ship with a faceless man beside her. Then the picture changed and he saw her again, pushing him aside to take in her chest a bullet meant for Smooth. Other pictures followed—of running fights with gun-crazy men when Gilda had laughed and tossed in her chip, willing to die with Smooth. Unwilling to live without him.

Smooth lifted his head and looked at his friend. McNeary had folded the note and put it into his pocket. The man's face was gray. The muscles in his jaws worked and twice he tried to speak but no words came. He swallowed hard and tried again.

"Gilda wouldn't want to live—on those terms, Smooth, he said slowly. "Please believe me. I love her as though she were my own daughter—and I know!"

"So do I, Mac," said Smooth. "But I'm not going to let her die. I can't! Great God—I can't!"

"What else can we do?" asked McNeary quietly. "I believe this man. He's a gambler and he's staking everything on getting that bomb-sight to his country. If he does, he'll be a national hero for the rest of his life—a man who did more to win a war than any dozen generals.

"Of course, we can send destroyers

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to stop the *Malay Princess* on the off chance Center is aboard. But I doubt that he is. He's clever enough to be sure the bomb-sight is aboard before he goes on. That's his ace in the hole—the delivery of the sight means you've traded your country for Gilda."

"But you think he has her with him now?"

"I'm sure he has. He'd have nothing to gain by a bluff."

"And that means—"

"I've got to give orders that will cancel the flight."

A THOUSAND mad thoughts whirled in Smooth's mind. It was as though he were living in a spinning red dream. Center! A nameless, faceless figure that was just out of reach. Smooth's hands tightened until the knuckle joints cracked. Just once! If he could see the man—get him under his gun—get one hand on his throat!

"Listen hard, Mac," he said quickly. "Center has killed a hundred men and outsmarted every agent in the service. He's more dangerous to this country than an enemy fleet. If you cancel that flight, you keep him from getting the sight. But you don't grab Center! He's still on the loose. And while we're wondering what to do next he'll be making another try for that instrument. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"If you let Hodkins take off, Center will figure I've sold out. When the sight is taken aboard the freighter he'll be *sure* I've sold out! Maybe I'm crazy—maybe I'm grabbing at straws, but I still think Nadja Sherene is on the level. Center has been using her, just as he's used me. Just as he's using Gilda. The man has been one jump ahead of everyone right from the go. Laughing at us. Laughing at Marie Roubard, Frederick and all the others. But no man ever lived who didn't make one mistake. Let Center go aboard the *Malay Princess*—let him make his first mistake!"

"Slow it down," said McNeary. He put his hand on Smooth's arm. Held it firmly for a moment. "I think I know your plan, and it's good. Crazy as the rest of them, but good. You want the deal to go through until Center goes aboard the *Malay Princess*. Then the destroyers close in and take him—is that it?"

"Almost," said Smooth. "I want you to—"

McNeary's eyes were cold. "You realize Center will kill Gilda before he's taken?"

"No, Mac—he won't!" said Smooth. "I want you to hold those destroyers out of sight for just twenty-four hours—one day! I've given a thousand days to the Government. So has Gilda. Now I want one day in return."

"What will you do with it?"

Smooth turned to Rags Donovan who had been sitting quietly in the corner of the cab. The little gunman had heard every word but not once had he opened his mouth to add an idea of his own. His grin was gone and his lips were thin. Like every man who roamed the Manhattan streets at night, he liked and respected Gilda Garland. Perhaps he, too, had been dreaming of a minute when he would have Center under his gun.

"Is your boat still covering the *Malay Princess?*" asked Smooth.

"Damn right it is," said Rags. "I give them boys orders to stay with the freighter until they run outa gas. Then they can sit out there until I come an' get 'em."

"How will you reach them?"

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"In me other boat. It might take a day t'find 'em but they ain't worried. Long as they stay in the steamer lane, I'll get 'em or a ship will give 'em gas."

"How soon can we get to your other boat?"

"In about two minutes, if you tell the driver to swing east on Forty-second Street," said Rags. "She's at the old wooden dock—right where the city is puttin' through a new tunnel. We work outa there because it's handy. The boys hang out in a restaurant on First Avenue, an' nobody asks 'em questions."

Smooth hammered on the forward window and pointed east. "Over to Forty-second and the river! Roll it, Johnny! But fast!"

The cab raced east and he turned to McNeary. "This is the deal, Mac! Rags and I will follow the *Malay Princess*. We'll keep in the clear until the sight is delivered. When Center goes aboard, I'll go with him. Don't ask me how I'll do it—I don't know. I'm guessing! Waiting for the breaks. If they come, Center will find he's made his first mistake."

THE taxi twisted through the early morning traffic in front of Grand Central Station and Rags Donovan sat forward, rubbing the knuckles of one hand against the palm of the other. His eyes were bright and the wide Irish grin had crept back. He hummed quietly, pausing at times to yell at the driver and demand more speed. Smooth watched McNeary's face. It was grave and thoughtful. For a time the inspector said nothing.

"Common sense tells me not to do this," he said at length. "It's a mad chance but I'll go halfway with you." He took out his watch and showed it to Smooth.

"It's a little after six and Hodkins takes off at seven. I'll notify the Navy Department to send out destroyers immediately but they will keep clear of the shipping lanes.

"The sun sets at five.

"At exactly five o'clock tonight they'll close in on the *Malay Princess* and send over a boarding party. She can't travel further than two hundred miles in that time—somewhere within a semicircle that reaches from Nantucket south to a point above Chesapeake Bay. Using planes as scouts, it won't be difficult to locate her." He put the watch back into his pocket and looked at Smooth. "That's the best I can do—ten hours from the time the plane takes off."

The cab raced across Lexington Avenue, jumped the lights at Third and Second and entered the stone-arched tunnel leading to First Avenue. Smooth said nothing for the simple reason that there was nothing to say.

McNeary had given him a break. It was all Smooth had ever asked. All he expected. When Rags Donovan hammered on the glass and called to the driver to stop, Smooth handed the inspector the list Marie had given him. He told him of Engel's brother and then took McNeary's hand. He shook it once and followed Rags to the street.

The door closed and he watched the cab hurry south along First Avenue, taking McNeary to the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

"Wait here!" called Rags. He hurried along the sidewalk toward a restaurant. "I'll collect a few helpers."

He was back in a moment and with him came four men Smooth remembered as hi-jackers and rum-runners who had worked the Atlantic Coast during Prohibition.

Tough men.

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Dave Marran, six foot and over with bent ears and a broken nose—a man who won drinks betting he could bend a half dollar between his fingers. Frankie Norris, short and dapper with the face of a kid and a gun that had killed a hundred men under his arm. Simply Davis, a barrel of a man in a blue pea-coat and dungarees. His face was round and sat on his shoulders as though there were no neck beneath it.

In the rear came Jeff Link, rubbing his eyes with a hand that was more like the paw of a bear than anything human. His face had been shaved but the stubble made a half mask that reached to his throat. His arms were long and heavy. He shuffled when he walked and his shoulders strained the seams of his worn coat.

"There's the baby," said Rags. "We named her *The Girl With The Irish Eyes,* but we call her *Toots* fer short."

They had come to the end of a wide dock and Rags was pointing to a battered boat that was rubbing against the docks piles. Her paint was bad and there were dents in the gunwales. A torn piece of canvas covered the forward cockpit and a stained tarpaulin was spread across the after section. A thousand people might have seen her without giving *The Girl With The Irish Eyes* a second glance. Dirty and disreputable; fit to do odd jobs along the river. Certainly not the type of boat to be used by hijackers and river pirates.

Smooth looked at her lines. Under the camouflage of dirt and ragged fenders he saw the sleek curves that mean speed. The wind was lifting and as the waves washed along the water line he noticed her bottom had been newly painted and was free from any marine growth. The bow was thinned to a knife edge and built to lift as the boat gathered speed and climbed onto her step.

"How fast can she go?" he asked.

"What's your guess?"

"Thirty, tops."

"Double it and you're nearer to right," said Rags. He motioned to Simply Davis. "He's good with engines. But good!"

Jeff Link had thrown back the tarpaulin and Davis put a key in the small cabin that housed the motors. Norris and Dave Marron cast off the lines and Rags stepped aboard. Smooth followed and seated himself in the stern. Rags took the cover off the wheel, adjusted a seat that had been hidden beneath a crate and looked at Davis.

"Whenever you're ready," said Davis. "*Toots* is simply waitin' to go."

CHAPTER XXX

HARBOR VITAL

RAGS touched the starter button and the motor purred. He shifted into reverse and the boat slid back from the dock. The current caught her stern and swung it north while Marron pulled the bumpers inboard and cleared away the cover. Link had opened a locker and was pulling out oilskins and sou'westers. He tossed a set to Smooth, another to Rags and jerked his thumb toward the locker as he lifted one heavy eyebrow questioningly.

"We'll be needin' them?" he asked.

"But plenty!" laughed Rags. He glanced at Smooth and then toward the locker. "Link wants to know if we'll be needin' the artillery. After he gets a sample of what Center can dish out, he'll wish we was carryin' armor plate and torpedo tubes."

Smooth put on the yellow oilskin jacket, snapped the clasps and wished he had brought an overcoat.

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The wind was raw and spray drifted back from the bow as the boat gathered speed. A wave broke over the counter and drenched Dave Marron. The six-footer wiped his face and reached into the locker to pull out a long wooden case. He glanced toward the dock that was slipping away behind them, looked casually over the river and then opened the cover of the case.

He took out a sub-machine gun, tested the action and fitted a drum into place. He brought out another and gave it to Frankie Norris. With it went a wide piece of rag and Frankie started to remove the oil.

Davis stayed near the motors and Jeff Link went forward to do his share on the guns. There was no excitement. The men went about their duties as though they were rigging out poles for a fishing trip.

Smooth watched for a time and then turned to glance at the New York dockline. It was drifting past at an ever-increasing pace. A steady roar lifted from the motors. The boat lifted its bow and a curling white wave swept away from each side.

They raced under the tall arch of the Williamsburg Bridge, swung west in a wide curve and headed toward the next. Smooth guessed their speed at forty or better as they passed under the Manhattan Bridge.

When they reached the old stone towers of the Brooklyn span he looked toward the whitecaps on the Upper Bay and shivered. The boat slashed through some, slowed, leaped others and kept Smooth's hands busy on the rail.

"What time did the *Malay Princess* leave?" asked Rags.

"Five-thirty," said Smooth. "Hesson told me she would make eight knots when she left her anchorage."

"That'd put her in the Channel—crossin' the Lower Bay by now. We'll see her in twenty minutes or so. Keep your eye open for the *Woots*."

"The which?"

"*The Girl With The Irish Nose*," said Rags. "That's the other boat—we call her *Woots* for short. Cute, eh? *Toots* an' *Woots*—the girls that keep the Harbor Police standin' on their ears."

Smooth grinned as he crouched behind the instrument panel to shelter his face from the wind. Marron and Norris had come aft and spread a square of canvas on deck. They put three sub-machine guns on the cloth, covered them and seated themselves near Smooth.

Forward, Jeff Link was seated cross-legged on the low deck of the open cockpit, a gun across his knees and a pipe in his mouth. Davis crouched beside the engine hatch, listening intently to the roar of the motors. At times he glanced at Rags and called: "Simply perfect! Simply wonderful, that's what!"

THE wind lowered as they crossed the Upper Bay and headed toward the Narrows. Rags gunned the motors and the *Toots* was leaping as she spun past Forts Wadsworth and Hamilton. Smooth tried to guess the speed. It was no use.

He'd never been in a boat that could eat up the miles like this mad thing. He looked at Rags Donovan. The little gunman was apparently having the time of his life. His eyes were bright and his hair streamed back from his head like a stiff- bristled brush.

At times he swerved close to an incoming freighter, bouncing the *Toots* over the wave tops in leaps that threatened to open her seams. They crossed Gravesend Bay and found more wind

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on the open water. Smooth wondered if his ribs would hold out. Or his head.

Then he forgot it.

"There's the *Woots!*" called Link. He pointed toward another dot that leaped across the water. "Cutting a circle—now she sees us."

Smooth saw the dot grow to a boat. Spray flew from her bow in two featherlike jets. The *Woots* came toward them, eating the distance as her sister raced to meet her. She spun in a half circle and stopped. Rags cut the motor and the *Toots* dropped down on her forward step. The boats drifted together and a voice called: "How're ya, Rags?"

Rags wailed, "My raiment is ruined, no less. What happens here?"

There were four men in the *Woots*. Smooth recognized two—Champ Massey, a former rum-runner, and Walter Betts, his partner. Betts was at the wheel and he jerked his thumb toward a freighter a mile distant.

He seemed pleased.

"Everything's copasetic," he called. "We been keepin' clear but Champ has the glasses on her all the time. Too bad you didn't get out sooner. There was a swell scrap in the Narrows. Some new mob in a speed boat took over a tug—one of the Marrondale boats."

"When?" called Smooth.

"About six o'clock. The speed boat was loaded heavy—about twenty guys. We swung close enough to see the fight but we couldn't stay."

"Where did the tug go?"

"She's up ahead. Running southeast. So is the speedboat."

THAT added up with Nadja's story. Center's men had waited until the tug was well clear and had then taken over. If things broke as they should, these men would be standing by to grab the plane. With the speedboat to help, they could have the bomb-sight off in a few minutes.

"Don't get too close to the freighter," he said to Betts. "If you see a plane come down, keep your glasses on it."

"Then what?" asked Betts.

Rags reached down and took a gun from under the canvas. He held it up so Betts could see it. "Then you join the Navy, pal! Like I told you—we're workin' fer Uncle Sammy! Get goin'!"

Both motors roared into life.

Betts swung his boat in a wide curve and followed the black buoys that served as markers for one side of the Ambrose Channel. Rags raced east in another wide arc that would put the *Toots* in front of the Marrondale tug. It was almost seven o'clock when he sighted her.

"We're about six miles off the coast. What next?"

"We wait," said Smooth.

Rags cut the motor. The wind had dropped a little but the ocean still moved restlessly as the long rolling swells swept in toward the distant shore. An autumn sun was low over the horizon, red and misted with a promise of storm. Marching columns of puffy white clouds moved across the sky. Smooth pulled back the cuff of his oilskin jacket and glanced at his wrist watch.

"Seven o'clock," he said. "Hodkins is taking off."

"We hope!" said Rags.

He took the glasses Jeff Link had been using to study the tug and passed them to Smooth. Then he dug a package of cigarettes from his pocket and passed them over, too. Smooth took both.

He needed them.

He tried to light up and found his fingers were numb. He rubbed them and

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tried again. This time it worked. He drew deep and felt better.

"Which way is Mitchell Field?" he asked. Rags pointed to the northeast and Smooth lifted the glasses. He looked slowly along the horizon line, saw a dark speck and pointed to it. "What's your guess?"

"Lessee."

Rags looked through the glasses. "A plane—comin' fast. Not very high, either."

The plane grew rapidly in size—a silver thing with wide spread wings. The sound of its motors came as a distant drone. It grew as the bomber swept over them. Smooth looked again at his watch.

"This is it!" he said. "Five minutes after seven!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Microscopic Optic

BACK in the Middle Ages, when the scholastic philosophers kept themselves busy discussing the number of angels who could dance on the point of a needle, they needed a man like Archie McGhee, of New York.

For, given the needle, Mr. McGhee could have seen the angels—if any—and counted 'em.

It's his right eye. With that eye—a human microscope, no less—he can read the Lord's Prayer (or the Gettysburg Address, or what have you) engraved on the head of a pin, just as easily as the ordinary reader can skim over headline type.

Appropriately enough, Mr. McGhee was cast in life as a watchmaker. When he was working at the trade as a boy in Scotland, his overseer threatened to report him to his parents for not working with a magnifying glass fitted to his eye. So all right—he used the glass.

But he didn't need it. Through that phenomenal right eye (we are told) he can look at a watch and see it the size of a saucer. He can check over those tiny wheels and gadgets inside a timepiece as easily as you can check over the contents of your cigarette case—using, of course, only the naked eye.

And another thing: this phenomenal right optic enables Mr. McGhee to see with a minimum of light. He can sit at night in the window of his room, reading by nothing more than the glow of a small lamp in a shop across the street. His father, he says, had the same kind of sight: used to read the paper in the dark, on the way home from work.

—*Captain John V. Bogle*

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MEN of DARING

by STOOKIE ALLEN

FREDERICK WALLACE
UNDERWATER DETECTIVE
FRED WALLACE ISN'T A COP, BUT THE POLICE COULDN'T GET ALONG WITHOUT HIM. HE'S A DIVER WHO SPECIALIZES IN FERRETING OUT ALL MANNER OF CLUES AND DEAD BODIES.
WHEN GRAPPLING FAILS, WALLACE IS CALLED IN. WORKING IN CIRCLES, ON HANDS AND KNEES, HE HAS DEVELOPED A SIXTH UNDERWATER SENSE THAT SELDOM FAILS. ONCE, HOWEVER, THE BODY OF A GIRL FLOATED UP BEHIND HIM AND HE GOT THE FRIGHT OF HIS LIFE WHEN HER ARMS WENT AROUND HIS NECK!
IN 1936, FRED RECOVERED THE HEAD OF MURDERED GRAYCE ASQUITH, AT ALMOST THE SAME SPOT IN BOSTON HARBOR THAT HIS FATHER, ALSO A DIVER, HAD FOUND THE HEAD OF THE MURDERED ACTRESS, SUSAN GEARY, 30 YEARS BEFORE!
CRAWLING THROUGH SILT 150 FEET DOWN IN THE MURKY DEPTHS OF AN ABANDONED QUARRY AT QUINCY, MASS., HIS UNDERWATER SENSE TOOK HIM TO THE BODY OF THOMAS "RED" CURRAN, GANGSTER RIDE VICTIM —AND TO THE GUN THAT KILLED HIM. HE EVEN LOCATED A PAIR OF SHOES THAT SENT A MURDERER TO THE CHAIR!

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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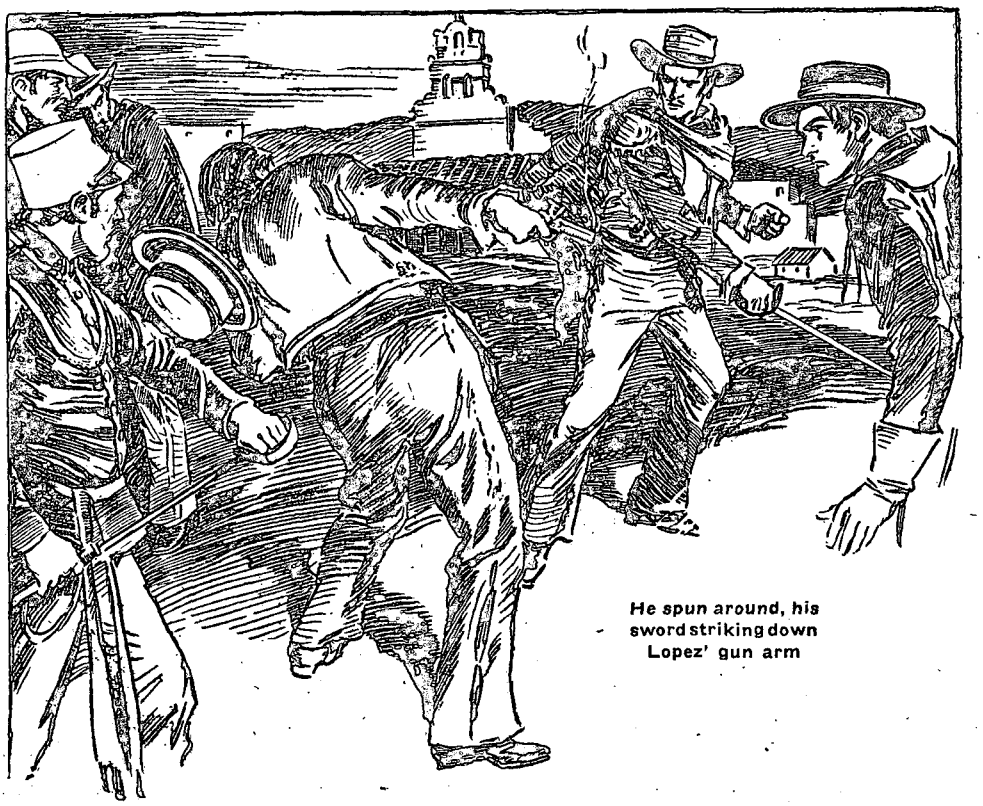

He spun around, his sword striking down Lopez' gun arm

The Devil's Doubloons

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

DON CARLOS DE LA MENDOZA, advocate of Monterey, has launched his career through gold obtained from a mysterious benefactor who signs himself EL DIABLO.

In defending the cause of old DON ANTONIO DE LA PRADO, Mendoza comes into conflict with MARCOS LOPEZ, an unscrupulous trader who controls the law, and CAPITÁN ZUBIATE, *commandante* of the *presidio*, who does Lopez' bidding.

Meanwhile he has fallen in love with Don Antonio's daughter, INEZ DE LA PRADO, who had secretly appeared as a masked dancer in the *cantina* of PEDRO PULIDO. Pulido and Don Carlos guard the secret well, as exposure would ruin the lady and break her father's heart—even though her conduct in the matter was quite innocent.

BUT Capitán Zubiate calls on Don Carlos; offering him the magistrate's position if he will throw in his lot with Lopez. When Don Carlos refuses, he threatens to reveal the identify of CARMENCITA, the masked *cantina* dancer.

And when that evening Don Carlos goes to the *cantina* with his friend, DON JOSÉ SENTOUS, a *cantina* girl named JUANITA is

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killed throwing herself in the way of a knife that Lopez has drawn on Sentous.

Capitán Zubiate orders Pulido, keeper of the *cantina,* to present himself in court, bringing with him all his employees—including the masked dancer, Carmencita. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

A GAME FOR TWO

BACK in his own house Don Carlos paced around the chamber while Don José sat on the edge of the couch, his head lowered into his hands.

The *cantina* had been closed, and Don Carlos, as Pedro Pulido's advocate, had instructed him to remain quietly in his house and await developments.

"She took the steel meant for me," Don José said, for perhaps the tenth time.

"Do not feel so bad, *amigo,*" Don Carlos said. "She was glad to die for you."

"I shall give the *frailes* gold to say masses for her."

"That is the correct thing," Don Carlos agreed. "And I shall be glad to do the same. She is gone, and cannot be called back. But we can fight what sent her to her death."

"Marcos Lopez! I'll kill him!"

"Softly, my friend. 'Tis not only Marcos Lopez. 'Tis the rest of the foul crew, also. Marcos Lopez could not strut the earth as he does if others did not permit it. Don José, I have been doing some strange thinking lately. Fray Luis told me once that dignified reserve was the part of a gentleman, but that arrogant false pride was not.

"You and I were fortunate in our parents, *amigo.* We are fortunate that certain blood flows in our veins. But can we blame others born less noble through no fault of their own?"

"I do not understand, Don Carlos."

" 'Tis not the accident of birth makes the man, but what he makes of himself given the advantage of good birth. It is a disgrace if one of good birth does not make the most of his opportunities."

"I presume so, Don Carlos."

"Every human being has certain rights, *amigo,* and some have had those rights denied them. Old traditions can be cruel. But here in this new land, where manhood counts more than a man's mere name, certain traditions can be cast aside. Let us not scorn low birth, *amigo,* but let us rather scorn low acts regardless of birth."

Don José got up and started pacing around the room also.

"What are you going to do, Don Carlos?" he asked.

"I am going to ask you to undertake a delicate mission for me. I'll send Bernardo with you as bodyguard. I want you to go to the *magistrado* Juan Cazzara's house and seek him out. Tell him what happened at the *cantina,* if he has not heard of it already. And ask him to come here with you immediately, to see me. Hint that it will be greatly to his advantage. Say what you will, José, but get him here. And do it as secretly as possible."

He called Bernardo and sent him with Don José, after giving him instructions. Don Carlos descended to the big main room of the house, and went out into the moon-drenched patio, where roses climbed the high adobe walls and scattered their fragrance on the night air.

A servant came to him.

"Don Carlos, the sailor and the fisherman desire to talk to you," he said.

"Here in the patio."

He sat on a bench and awaited them. They came out of the house and stood before him, holding their sombreros.

"Well, *señores?*" Don Carlos asked.

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"WE HAVE collected a quantity of information, Don Carlos," Tomas said. "We do not know the value of it, and this fisherman who is a good fellow even if he does cling close to the shore, suggests that we give it all to you, that you may decide which is good and what is worthless."

"An excellent idea," Don Carlos said. "What have you learned?"

"We bought wine for several rogues," Tomas explained. "It was a shame to waste good wine on them, but we were following your orders. Some of the fellows are in the pay of this Marcos Lopez."

"What said they?"

"That there is some plot afoot to undo you, *señor*. In it somewhere is a *señorita*. The *capitán* of the soldiery is concerned. The rogues hinted that through some girl the *capitán* would make you do as he pleased, and that this Marcos Lopez would profit by it in some manner."

"What else?" Don Carlos asked.

"Marcos Lopez for some reason is angered at Señor Pulido. There is a scheme to have Señor Pulido's property confiscated, so Señor Lopez can buy it in for almost nothing and operate the *cantina* himself. One of the rogues told me he will manage the place when this happens."

"Interesting," Don Carlos commented.

"But this Lopez is more angered at you, *señor*," the fisherman put in. "He has sworn to have you disgraced first and slain afterward. When one of the rogues told me that, I made the remark that Señor Lopez might find himself being punished for it, and the rogue laughed and said that those who deal out punishment were Señor Lopez' friends."

"So I understand," said Don Carlos. "You have done well for a beginning. Go to your quarters, now, and sleep well. I may have more work for you tomorrow."

"If the *cantina* is closed—" Tomas suggested.

"Closed doors may be opened," Don Carlos said.

He paced around the patio again after they had gone. He realized he was dealing with clever rogues who would stop at nothing to gain their ends. He had come far in a few days; far since the moment he had been on the verge of taking his own life. Perhaps he had been traveling too fast, he told himself, and was rushing to destruction.

His fingers strayed to the hidden pocket in his jacket, and he felt the five doubloons which he still kept there. He remembered that he must put half the fee he had received from Don Antonio aside for the unknown who had sent him the doubloons.

Those gold coins still troubled him. He wanted to believe what Fray Luis said—that they had been sent by some well-meaning friend, and not by the Evil One.

His winning at the gambling tables—was that only a coincidence? His victory in Don Antonio's case, the fact that he had so far outwitted his foes—were they merely coincidences? Perhaps. But the light remained: the light he had seen on the shore, when the fisherman declared no light was burning.

He could not dismiss this thing with a shrug and a laugh. Superstition had been born in him and still flourished at times. He would counsel with old Fray Luis again at the earliest opportunity, he decided.

THE air was chilly, and Don Carlos left the patio and went back into the house. In time, Don José and Ber-

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nando returned, and Juan Cazzara was with them shrouded in a black cloak like a skulking villain.

"Welcome to my house, *señor,*" Don Carlos said. "You will not regret coming."

"All this is very irregular Don Carlos—very much so," the *magistrado* said, appearing to be much agitated. "But I have heard what happened at the *cantina* tonight and know you were there and thought perhaps you had important information to give me concerning it."

Don Carlos had wine served, then gestured for Bernardo to leave. He motioned Don José to a chair, and sat close to the *magistrado* himself.

"This is a confidential meeting, Señor Cazzara," he explained. "As an advocate I am sworn to uphold the dignity of all courts, and to protect those who hold positions in them."

"That is so, Don Carlos."

"I hope that I am an honest man, *señor,* above all petty intrigue."

"I am sure you are, Don Carlos."

"So, when I was approached with the proposition that you be cast off by those you think are your friends, and that I be given the honors you now enjoy—"

"How is this?" Cazzara interrupted.

"Capitán Zubiate called on me, *señor,* here in my house. He said certain persons of power would rather have me for friend than enemy. If I joined hands with them in their enterprises, he informed me, you would be deposed, and I would be given the appointment of *magistrado* here in Monterey."

Cazzara's face purpled with rage. "They would dare?" he cried.

"Seemingly so, *señor.* I refused, naturally. For two reasons. The first one is that I do not countenance such conduct. The second is, *señor,* that those in power now, who could make such an arrangement may not be in power long."

Cazzara's eyes widened. "Then you —you are a man of the Viceroy's?"

"I have not said so, *señor,* and let us not discuss that, if you please. Let us consider where you stand in this matter. Do you desire to be an honest official?"

"I do, Don Carlos."

"Are you afraid to stand by law and justice, though they oppose the interests of those regarding whom we have been speaking?"

Cazzara gulped. "Whatever the cost—" he said.

"Bueno! Then there is hope for you, *señor,* and you may not be punished for the trangressions you have committed already."

"What shall I do, Don Carlos?"

"Have some more wine, *señor.* Then sit closer, and we will discuss details."

CHAPTER XX

SPEAK NOT OF LOVE

MIDMORNING of the following day, Don Carlos mounted his horse, and Bernardo his mule, and started to Don Antonia de la Prado's house out beside the sparkling bay.

Don Carlos had communicated with Pedro Pulido, sending a written message by Bernardo, telling him to have no anxiety about matters. He would not be ordered into court with the *cantina* employees on this day, Don Carlos had written, because he had authentic information that the *magistrado* had taken to bed with a chill, and there would be no court session until later.

Don Carlos' face was grim as he galloped along the road, with Bernardo on the mule a short distance behind him. They dismounted in front of the Prado house, Don Carlos handed his reins to

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Bernardo, went to the door and used the bronze knocker.

The aperture in the door opened, and the old servant peered out.

"They are gone, Excellency," the servant said.

"Gone?"

"Don Antonio was eager to get to his *rancho,* and he went this morning with the *señorita* and her *dueña,* leaving me here alone. Don Antonio bought a carriage and pair late yesterday afternoon."

"How does one get to the *rancho?*" Don Carlos asked.

"It is but a short distance for a carriage or a horseman," the servant explained, and gave directions.

Don Carlos mounted and started off again at a good rate of speed, Bernardo keeping as close as possible. They came to a long, sloping hill where Don Carlos let his horse walk, and swayed forward in the saddle to ease his body. He gave his mount a short breathing spell when the crest of the hill was reached, then urged him on.

He wanted to warn the *senorita,* if possible, that Capitán Zubiate might know the identity of Carmencita. But he knew something more than that impelled him to the journey. He was on fire to see her again, watch her sparkling eyes, listen to her rich, deep voice.

He must have her as his wife and the mistress of his house, he decided. She was the first woman he had met whom he desired to fill the position. As soon as these difficulties were ironed out, and he was a man of substance—

POUNDING hoofs broke into his reverie. He was approachinng a curve in the road, and he pulled slightly to one side, so the unknown horseman who approached with speed would not crash into him.

Around the curve came Capitán Zubiate.

Don Carlos had almost stopped, and Bernardo had pulled up a few feet behind him. Zubiate was riding without escort. He reined in and sat his dancing horse a few feet away.

"Our paths seem to lie in the same direction this morning, Don Carlos," the *capitán* said.

"So it would seem, *señor.*"

"Only, you are going, and I am returning. You are perhaps having your journey for nothing."

"What do you mean by that, *señor?*"

Zubiate laughed. "I just remembered that you dislike to have me speak to you, Don Carlos, so I will spare your feelings and say no more."

He laughed again, wheeled his horse and spurred away toward the distant town. Thoughtfully, Don Carlos went on in the direction of the *rancho.*

The buildings were low and sprawling, and were approached by a winding lane bordered with huge trees. Don Carlos did not wonder that Don Antonio liked the place. The distant slopes were dotted with cattle and sheep, and there were orchards and vineyards.

Don Carlos stopped before the sprawling ranch house, and Bernardo took his reins. Two native servants came to get the horse and mule.

"Don Antonio is in the patio, *señor,*" one of the men said.

The other ushered him to the patio. Don Antonio was sitting in a huge chair, propped up by cushions as usual. His eyes were sparkling.

"Ah, my boy, it is good to be here again" he said. "I have you to thank for it. But there is so much to be done. That scoundrel made changes which have to be made anew."

"Do not try to do everything in a single day, Don Antonio."

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"Capitán Zubiate stopped by a short time ago."

"I passed him on the road. He had business with you?"

"He was back in the hills, he told me. There have been rumors of some renegade stirring up the natives again, and the *capitán* has been inspecting the canyons, to see if miscreants are gathering there."

Don Carlos sat on the bench in front of the elderly man, and pulled off his riding gauntlets.

"I hoped to have the pleasure of seeing the *señorita,*" he suggested.

"She is somewhere about, my boy. No doubt she will appear presently. Capitán Zubiate paid his respects to her. He is an uncouth beast with vile blood in his veins, but he is the *commandante* of Monterey, hence must be treated decently."

DON CARLOS bent forward. "*Señor,* I admire your daughter very much," he said. "I would be delighted to appear in the light of a suitor for her hand."

"Bless me!" Don Antonio exclaimed. "Ah, to be young! I well remember when I first met her mother. Don Carlos, I have no objection to you. I know your family, and you please me personally. But you must gain her warm regard. I told myself years ago that I never would urge her to a marriage she did not want."

"I would not desire her, *señor,* did she not desire me also."

"That is the proper thought, my boy." He clapped his hands, and a native servant came running. "Take word to the *señorita* that Don Carlos de la Mendoza is here with me in the patio, and would be delighted to pay his respects," he ordered.

The native bowed and sped away like a shadow. Don Antonio rambled on in his talk. Presently, the native returned.

"The *señorita* begs to be excused," he reported. "She has an aching of the head."

"Nonsense!" Don Antonio stormed. "She never has a headache."

"She says to tell you, master, that she does not care to see Don Carlos."

"What, what?" Don Antonio stormed. He gestured for the native to go away, and looked up at Don Carlos with his watery eyes. "It is a sign of interest," he declared. "You will win her heart, *señor.*"

"When she refuses to see me?" Don Carlos asked. "I had thought that I was pleasing to her, but it seems otherwise."

"You young men are so senseless. When a girl feels that she is growing interested in a man, she sometimes fights against it. She does not want to surrender. She pretends he is nothing to her—and has headaches. Try another time, Don Carlos."

"Thank you," Don Carlos said, stiffly. "I must return to Monterey immediately, for I have much work to do."

"Come out and see us again, my boy. I intend to remain at the *rancho* until I get it running properly again. You are always welcome."

Don Carlos bowed and left the patio. He could not understand this. Refusing to see him! He had thought that her interest in him was great. He remembered the things she had said when he had seen her last, when her *dueña* had been half asleep.

Slowly, he walked along the wall of the house toward the front. And a soft call came to him from a window above:

"Don Carlos!"

He glanced up and saw her looking down at him. Her face was white, and she had been weeping.

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"Await me in the garden," she said.

Wondering, he turned into the garden and stood beside a fountain, and after a little time she came hurrying to him.

"Forgive me for sending the message I did," she begged.

"I did not understand."

"My *dueña* thinks I am in my room, *señor,* but she may find me missing and search for me, so I must be swift in what I have to say. Never think, Don Carlos, that I do not appreciate what you have done for us. Never think that I—that I do not admire you very much."

"I CAME today for two reasons, *señorita.* One was to warn you that Capitán Zubiate may know the identity of Carmencita. The other was to ask your father to consider me a suitor for your hand."

"Oh, *señor!*" she whispered. "If it could only be."

"Why can it not?"

"Capitán Zubiate has been here, *señor.* He had a chance for a word alone with me. He told me he knows I am Carmencita."

"And what else, *señorita?*"

"He said the shame would kill my father, and I agreed with that. But he said he would keep the secret, *señor,* if I—if I would accept him as a suitor, and marry him after a season."

"He—" Don Carlos' rage choked him, and he could not speak.

"What else can I do, *señor?* To be disgraced and shamed, because I earned gold to keep my father and myself! To have my old father, my only relative, wither away and die, hanging his head in his last days—"

"The man who asked you to make such a sacrifice is no man at all!" Don Carlos said. "The thing is unthinkable. Unless of course, you have a liking for him."

"I detest him, *señor,* as you should know. My liking—is elsewhere—as also you should know."

"*Señorita—!*" He stepped toward her.

"No!" she said, putting up her hand. "I am ashamed that I have let you know, but I felt I should."

"If you feel for me the half I feel for you, *señorita,* there is no shame in it, only glory."

"And now, *señor,* I must hurry back into the house. You will best forget me."

"Never that. What you have just intimated gives me the right to handle the man."

"Not that, *señor,* I beg of you! It would all come out. People would wonder why you fought."

Don Carlos stepped closer to her. "Do not think of this seriously for a moment," he begged. "Have no anxiety. I will attend to the matter. When I come to see you again, there will be no obstacle between us, *señorita.* And I hope you do not have a headache."

CHAPTER XXI

"CARMENCITA WILL UNMASK!"

ON HIS way back to Monterey, Don Carlos passed Pedro Pulido, but he did not know it. Seeing him coming from afar, Pulido pulled off the road and hid himself behind a bunch of rocks until Don Carlos had passed.

He did not know, either, how Pedro Pulido managed to see the *señorita* alone at the *rancho,* nor hear what he said to her. He would have been charmed at her cry of delight as Pulido unfolded a plan.

Nor did he know that Pedro Pulido carried with him, when he returned to

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town, a letter the *señorita* had written to Capitán Zubiate, and which Pulido sent to the *presidio* by a servant. The letter turned the *capitán* into a raging demon for a few minutes. It said:

> ***Capitán Zubiate, at the presidio of Monterey:***
>
> ***I have been considering your words to me, and have reached the conclusion that I was unduly frightened. On reflection, it occurs to me that you are an insolent upstart. I do not desire to see you again, ever, and if you should call at the rancho or my father's house in Monterey, I feel sure you will be ordered from the place.***
>
> ***Inez de la Prado***

His spasm of rage at an end, Zubiate steeled himself to have a swift revenge. He sent word to Pulido, ordering him to be in court the following morning with all the *cantina* employees, including the girl Carmencita, else suffer the consequences of ignoring such an order. He held a conference with Marcos Lopez' counselor, and they made plans.

Juan Cazzara's face was pale as he mounted the bench in the *magistrado's* court the next day, but not from the chill he was supposed to have had the day before. He licked at lips dried by the fever of fear. His eyes were half glazed as he glanced at the throng in the room.

Cazzara had had a battle with himself. He had weighed the dangers of opposing those with whom he had been in league against the danger of opposing Don Carlos, whom he believed to be the Viceroy's special representative, and had decided to brave the wrath of the former. He had not forgotten how his fellow rogues were ready to throw him over.

Pedro Pulido and the *cantina* people were in a room adjoining, waiting to be called to appear. Marcos Lopez was in court with his counselor. Capitán Zubiate had a smirk of self-satisfaction on his face as he stalked around the room.

"Marcos Lopez!" the *magistrado* called, unexpectedly.

"Here *señor*," Lopez called.

"Capitán Zubiate!"

"I am here naturally," Zubiate replied.

Cazzara glared at him. "You will be prepared to carry out orders of the court, *capitán*. I see Don Carlos de la Mendoza is present, and also Don José Sentous, needed as witness. The others concerned are held in the anteroom."

Cazzara fumbled with some papers on his desk, cleared his throat, gulped a few times, and finally gathered courage enough to continue.

"I HAVE issued herewith a complaint against Marcos Lopez, charging him with conspiracy to take a human life, with an attempt to do so by violence, and with the murder of a *cantina* girl known as Juanita—"

"What is this?" Lopez shouted.

"Silence, *señor!*" Cazzara warned. "Capitán Zubiate, you will take Señor Lopez into custody."

"I do so now," Zubiate replied. Aside to Lopez, he said: "It is a legal form. How can you be cleared of killing that girl unless you are first charged with the crime?"

"So that is it," Lopez said, relieved.

But his counselor took charge of the affair:

"You issued these complaints at whose request?" he asked.

"At the request of Don José Sentous, who is represented in this court by Don Carlos de la Mendoza. We will proceed first with the case of Pedro Pulido, accused of operating a *cantina* in a manner calculated to inspire disurbance and violence. Bring in the prisoner and those concerned with him."

Capitán Zubiate glanced at Don Car-

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los and smiled his oily smile, and Don Carlos wondered at the meaning of it. He was soon to learn. The door of the anteroom was opened, and Pedro Pulido came into the courtroom.

Behind him came the *cantina* girls, the musicians, the cooks and waiters and men who handled wine, and those who presided over the gambling tables. They were packed into a small space in a corner of the room.

Don Carlos felt Don José's strong grip on his arm.

"Look!" Don José whispered.

Don Carlos looked, and almost sprang from his seat with a cry. She was there: the same dress, the masked face, the black hair and headdress. She stood back against the wall, behind some of the others.

"It is Carmencita," the whisper ran around the room. "Perhaps the *magistrado* will compel her to unmask, and we shall see her face at last."

Don Carlos felt like a man turned to stone. Cazzara spoke to him twice before he realized he was being addressed. He got up and went forward.

"If the court please, I desire to exchange a few remarks with my client, Señor Pulido, before proceeding," he said.

"Be as brief as possible," Cazzara warned.

Don Carlos beckoned Pulido aside.

"What manner of man are you?" he hissed into the *cantina* man's ear. "How dare you do this thing? To save your own worthless hide, I suppose you have agreed to expose her—"

Pulido gestured.

"Softly, Don Carlos. Say nothing you may regret."

"I regret only that we are not where I can wring your neck, *señor.*"

"Proceed with the case. It is a trick that—"

"Don Carlos, let us proceed at once!" Cazzara called from the bench.

Don Carlos proceeded. He had gathered a few witnesses of standing, and they testified that they had visited Pulido's *cantina* frequently, and considered it run in an orderly manner.

He made no effort to prevent testimony of what had happened just before the *cantina* was closed. He questioned Don José, who told of the attack Lopez had made on him, and the manner of Juanita's death.

CAPITÁN ZUBIATE made his charges. He had been in the *cantina* at the time, he explained. He had seen the trouble. The girl had got in the way during the quarrel. Her death was an accident.

But, he declared, there were frequent quarrels and fights in the *cantina.* There was always trouble over the *cantina* girls. One, called Carmencita, danced vulgarly and flirted with men and stirred them against one another. Pedro Pulido's place was a spot of disorder.

"Capitán Zubiate, you admit that you saw Marcos Lopez have the trouble, and strike the blow which killed the girl?" Don Carlos asked.

"I do, *señor.*"

"Señor Lopez was supposed to be a prisoner in your custody. How does it happen he was in the *cantina?*"

"I saw no harm in taking the *señor* there with me, since he wished relaxation."

"You allowed him to drink wine to excess. Witnesses have said he was intoxicated. Had you not taken him to the *cantina, capitán,* the poor girl, Juanita, would have been alive now. You are in reality an accessory to this murder."

"You dare so charge me?" Zubiate cried.

"I may so charge you later," Don

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Carlos said. "We are now considering your charge that the *cantina* is a disorderly place."

Pulido thrust his way forward and appealed to the *magistrado:*

"I ask justice, *señor!* Captain Zubiate says my masked dancer is vulgar. I would have her sing and dance now and here, that the court may see."

"And I demand that, after she dances, this court compel her to unmask!" Zubiate said. "Let the court see the woman he is judging."

"So be it!" Cazzara ordered. He had looked in vain to Don Carlos for a signal of some sort.

Pulido gestured, and his musicians stepped forward. So did the masked girl. Don Carlos sat on the bench beside Don José and groaned. He understood none of this. He would make Pulido pay for it, he promised himself.

"Now we shall see her face, *amigo,*" Don José whispered to him. "I wager she will be beautiful."

The musicians began strumming their instruments. Swaying slightly, the masked girl began singing. It was a song Carmencita often sang in the *cantina.* Don Carlos tried not to listen to it, but finally he did.

Something attracted his attention, and he sat erect quickly. Across the room, his eyes met those of Pedro Pulido. Then he guessed what Pulido had not been able to tell him.

There was a slight difference in the song. Don Carlos knew something of music and singing. Carmencita was not phrasing the song exactly as she had done before.

THEN she began her dance. It was a thing of beauty and grace. the music grew faster and she danced in time with it, while those in the room craned necks to watch. With a crash the music ended, and she bowed to the *magistrado* and stepped back.

"I ask that she be compelled to unmask!" Zubiate cried. "Let us see the face of the girl who dances to stir the blood of men."

"One moment, *señor!*" Don Carlos called. "I am advocate for these accused. I appeal to the court. Was there vulgarity in that dance? Was there anything but grace and charm and beauty? Was not the song properly rendered? Capitán Zubiate, have you seen this girl dance before?"

"Several times, Don Carlos."

"Is she the Carmencita you accuse of vulgarity, of singing and dancing in a place of disorder and menace to the public peace?"

"She is. And I demand that she unmask, that all may know her."

"I agree," Don Carlos said.

Zubiate flashed a quick look at him. He did not understand this. He had expected that Don Carlos would put up a great fight to prevent her being ordered to unmask.

"You will unmask, *señorita,*" Cazzara ordered.

She put up her hands, fumbled with the strings of the mask, and removed it with a quick gesture. Those in the room saw the face of a girl with no particular claim to beauty, a face marred by a wide scar which ran across one cheek. That scar seemed excuse enough for wearing a mask.

"This—this," Zubiate stammered.

"This lady is Carmencita, the *cantina* dancer. You identified her before she unmasked, *capitán,*" Don Carlos said. "Now I ask the judgment of the court."

He stepped back, and Don José plucked at the bottom of his jacket.

"Now that I have seen her face, *amigo,* I am cured of my folly," Don José whispered. "Never agin will I

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fall half in love with a girl who wears a mask."

Cazzara cleared his throat and gulped again.

"The evidence," he said, "fails to bear out the charge. It appears that the *cantina* of Señor Pulido is even more orderly than most. I dismiss all charges against him."

Zubiate, Lopez and certain others in the room gasped in surprise.

"You—you dismiss them?" Zubiate howled. "Are you mad?"

"I am the *magistrado* here, *señor!*" Cazzara said. "You are merely an officer of the soldiery. And I hold you responsible in part for the death of the *cantina* girl, Juanita. Had you not allowed your prisoner to go to the *cantina,* the slaying would not have occurred."

"Why—you—" Zubiate stammered.

"Since all concerned are here, including witnesses, we will proceed with the charges against Marcos Lopez," Cazzara decided. "But in fact the testimony already has been given. The two causes are allied."

LOPEZ' counselor sprang forward. Cazzara seemed to have gone mad, and this madness must be stopped.

"If the court please, Marcos Lopez had no intention of harming the *cantina* girl," he began.

"I am surprised at you, counselor," Cazzara interrupted. "Marcos Lopez had every intention of slaying Don José Sentous, it is evident. He conspired against his life, in that he made a foul attack with a dagger, giving Don José no chance to draw a weapon—the act of a coward!"

He gathered his courage.

"It is true that his blow missed Don José and struck the girl Juanita in the breast, causing her death. It is a well known point of law, *señor,* that the intent follows to the conclusion. I hold Marcos Lopez guilty of the slaying."

"You hold him guilty?" the counselor cried.

"I do *señor,*" Cazzara replied. "Such a man is a menace in any community. We have no place for such here in Alta California. According to the code, I sentence Marco Lopez as follows: His lands, goods and chattels are confiscate, one half to go to the state and the other half for the benefit of the poor, and hereby certify the property to His Excellency the Governor for proper disposal by him."

"Monstrous!" Lopez shouted.

"And," Cazzara continued, "the aforesaid Marcos Lopez is also exiled from Alta California forthwith, not to return under penalty of death. A ship sails with the tide this evening, bound for the distant Sandwich Islands. Marcos Lopez will sail on her."

"A thousand hells!" Lopez roared. "Dastard!"

Cazzara was cool now.

"For that remark, Señor Lopez, I hold you in contempt, and instruct that you be punished forthwith with ten lashes across your bare back in the public plaza where all men may see. Capitán Zubiate, you will see all these sentences carried out without fear or favor, or I shall feel compelled to cite you to His Excellency the Governor as unfit and incompetent. This court now is adjourned."

Shocked silence ruled the room. Marcos Lopez dropped upon a bench, gasping like a man with a heart attack. Capitán Zubiate was like a man turned to stone.

Clever Cazzara! Zubiate knew the Governor well enough to know he would not be adverse to handling Lopez' estate. His Excellency would

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now take a high moral tone, and declare that such men as Lopez could not be tolerated in the realm. The wise man would follow that lead.

So Zubiate touched Marcos Lopez on the arm and addressed him sternly:

"Come, *señor,* there are sentences to be carried out," the *capitán* said. "The lashes first, then we check your property and arrange to deport you on the ship which goes out this evening with the tide."

Juan Cazzara tottered a little as he got down from the bench and went slowly and somewhat majestically into his retiring room. He expected the heavens to cave in upon him now, for what he had done. But he had been honest and a man for a moment, at least.

CHAPTER XXII

SEÑOR—EL DIABLO!

AS THE room started to clear, many hurrying to go to the plaza and see Marcos Lopez receive the lash, Don Carlos found himself for a moment beside Pedro Pulido.

The *cantina* owner smiled at him and whispered: "I had no opportunity to warn you, Don Carlos, and I was afraid you might do something to prevent if I did. I got the girl, about the size and shape of the one we know, and trained her in that song and dance. Yesterday I went out to the *rancho* and got the costume."

"You saved her, *señor,*" Don Carlos whispered in reply. "I humbly ask your pardon for upbraiding you a short time ago."

"The pardon is granted freely, Don Carlos. You served me well here today. Name your reward when it pleases you."

"Since you handled this affair to such advantage, I think we are quits, *señor,*" Don Carlos answered smiling.

"The one of whom we are speaking is safe, unless Zubiate discovers the trick and makes a denunciation."

"I will attend to that matter," Don Carlos said.

He bowed and turned away, to meet Don José and leave the building. Most of the others had gone outside, where a file of troopers under Zubiate's command were waiting to lead Marcos Lopez to the plaza. Lopez was standing aside talking to a couple of his friends.

Don Carlos stopped to receive the congratulations of a well-wisher, and Don José walked on. The crowd parted, and he found Marcos Lopez standing directly in front of him, rage in his face.

"So, my fine young rooster!" Marcos Lopez cried. "I have you to blame for this. I regret that my knife did not find your heart in the *cantina, señor.* But this time I shall not err."

It was not a knife Marcos Lopez brought from his sash, but a loaded pistol. As howls came from those nearest and they tried to scatter, as Zubiate screeched a warning and started forward, Marcos Lopez raised the pistol and fired.

Don José had seen the danger, and was quick to act. He swerved aside, stooped, and whipped his sword from its scabbard. The pistol exploded almost in his face and powder burned him. The ball struck him high in his left shoulder, spinning him half way around, and as he turned, his sword struck aside Lopez' gun arm.

Lopez lurched toward him dropping the pistol and trying to get out his knife. Don José's blade darted out once, and came back red, and Marcos Lopez gave a sigh and collapsed to the ground.

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DON JOSÉ reeled backward, suddenly faint, as Capitán Zubiate thrust aside the last men before him and reached the spot.

"You have slain him!" Zubiate cried.

"All here saw his foul attack on me," Don José replied. "I have the ball from his pistol in my shoulder now. And he was reaching for his knife. If you care to disturb me about this affair, *capitán,* you will find me at my home after my shoulder has been doctored."

Zubiate bowed. "It was a matter of defending your own life, Done José. These witnesses will bear me out in that statement. And that fellow had been ordered banished anyhow. There will be no official difficulty."

Then Don Carlos was beside Don José and supporting him. Someone offered a carriage for use; Don Carlos sent a man for Fray Luis, and had Don José taken to his own house.

In a chamber on the lower floor, Don José was stripped and put on a couch. The old *fray* arrived in a state of some trepidation and began attending him. The bullet was removed, the wound dressed and the shoulder bandaged.

"With care, the wound will heal quickly and properly," Fray Luis said. "'Twill scarcely leave an interesting scar. Drink more wine, Don José, and I will sit by you awhile until your nerves are calmer."

Don Carlos left them there and ascended to his own chamber. He sniffed as he entered it, for a strange odor assailed his nostrils. He could not identify it at first, and when he did a thrill ran through him. It was that odor reminiscent of brimstone, which he had detected when he had opened the metal casket containing the five doubloons.

On the table at the end of his couch, he found a missive. He opened it.

Don Carlos de la Mendoza, at his own house in Monterey:

I am much pleased, señor, with what you have done with the five doubloons. Retain them as souvenirs of this time of your life.

The share of the money which you put into the keeping of Fray Luis, I order you to let him retain, to be used for the poor. Of your earnings hereafter, put aside with him a little whenever it can be spared, until you have deposited with him the sum of two thousand pieces of gold. Then your debt to me is canceled.

You now have a proper start in life. So conduct yourself that the name of Mendoza will be known as a synonym of dignity and justice.

El Diablo

DON CARLOS perused that letter a second time. This certainly did not seem like the Evil One. To give money for the relief of the poor, to urge a man to a life of dignity and justice was not in character for *El Diablo.*

Don Carlos descended the stairs and called Fray Luis from the chamber, and gave him the letter to read. The old *fray's* eyes were twinkling when he had finished.

"More gold for my poor box," he said. "It is more than welcome."

"Can you give me the true meaning of all this, *fray?*" Don Carlos asked. "I would think as do you, that it all has been the work of some well-meaning friend, except for two things. I know of no such friend of mine here in Monterey; and there is the matter of the strange light I saw on the shore."

"Ah yes, the light. That puzzles me, too," Fray Luis said. "But it is not the Evil One who generally sets a guiding light in a window, my son. Let us sit down, and I will tell you what I think you should know."

They sat on a bench beside the patio door.

"There is in Monterey a man of modest birth and station who has a noble soul," Fray Luis began. "He served a noble family in his youth, and respects

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those of noble birth when they are worthy of respect. He serves as he can when he is able to help them."

"I understand, *fray.*"

"His means of livelihood is lowly, but it brings him gold. In mockery, he calls himself *El Diablo* when he sets about doing good. When he discovers a worthy person of good birth and station in difficulties, he tries to give that person a chance to take his proper position in life. A real man needs only an opportunity and a spur."

"That is true, *fray.*"

"I am in the confidence of this man, and he often comes to me for advice. He knew of the circumstances of the Prados, and tried to help without merely offering charity. The *señorita* had a talent for dance and song, and it was arranged for her to work at Pedro Pulido's *cantina* and earn gold, and at the same time be protected."

"'Twas dangerous," Don Carlos commented.

"It cost him nothing, but the *señorita* was ordered to give so much to the poor. In your case, my son, it was different. You needed a proper start in life and that took gold."

"How did he learn of my extremity?" Don Carlos asked.

"I knew, my son, and I informed him."

Don Carlos was amazed.

"You, *fray?*"

"Has it not worked out well? You received the doubloons at a critical moment, and they aroused you. Then the *señorita* called at your door—"

"She was concerned in it, *fray?*"

"She knew all, my son. Those who are benefited by this man are called on later, if necessary, to aid him in helping others. No doubt some day he will ask you to help him bring happiness to another."

"I understand, *fray,* and shall be glad to help."

"It costs him little beyond his effort, for the gold comes back to him and is used again for a similar purpose. The gold he instructs you to return to me represents his actual outlay in your case."

"There you err, *fray.* I got much more than that over the gambling tables."

"But not from him, my son. It was the *señorita's* part to come to your door and gently decoy you to Pulido's *cantina.* It was her task to get you to play at dice and cards."

"And how cleverly she did it!" Don Carlos said. "But the winnings . . . how do you explain them, *fray?* My sudden streak of good luck—"

FRAY LUIS smiled. "It was not luck, my son. The dealers had their orders, and they are clever men at their trade. So you won heavily, and made good use of your winnings. You established yourself. A worthy cause was thrown your way, and your ability won justice for your client.

"You made an instant name for yourself as an advocate. You made enemies, and have defeated them. You faced trials and endured them. There is nothing now to prevent your continued success, if you are the man your benefactor and I, think you."

"His name, *fray.*"

"You will be surprised, my son, when you hear it. He is not the man you would expect to do such work. Of all those you know in Monterey, he is perhaps the last you would suspect. He does good humbly, and is satisfied with that. He does not want thanks, but only that you help him aid others if the opportunity ever comes."

"His name!" Don Carlos said.

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"His name is Pedro Pulido, my son."

"The *cantina* owner?" Don Carlos cried.

"That is right. A lowly *cantina* owner, a man of quite a humble station in life, as you look at such things. I would we had more like him. Do you understand everything now?"

"Everything except the mysterious light I saw on the shore," Don Carlos said.

He got up to pace the floor. A servant approached, and said Tomas and the fisherman wished to see him. Don Carlos ordered that they be admitted.

They came in, sombreros in hand, and knelt quickly before Fray Luis for his blessing. Then they looked at each other as if each expected the other to speak first.

"What is it, *señores?*" Don Carlos asked.

"Don Carlos, my benefactor, we wish to give you thanks," the fisherman said. "The fine boat you ordered given me—I have seen it. And the nets and gear! And Tomas here, has agreed to remain ashore and become an honest fisherman, and my partner, as soon as you have finished with us."

"*Bueno!*" Don Carlos cried. "Go your ways, *señors,* and be prosperous. And do not forget to fetch me fresh fish for my table each morning."

"You shall have the finest in the sea, Don Carlos," Tomas declared.

"THERE is one matter," the fisherman added, "and it is fine that the good *fray* is here, for possibly he may instruct me. I am ashamed to say it, Don Carlos, and crave your pardon for it but—once I lied to you."

"How is this?"

"I have it on my conscience now that you have been so good to me. About the light you said you saw on the shore, Don Carlos, the night you escaped the ship."

"What of that?" Don Carlos asked.

"I did have a light burning, *señor,* at that time. I lied about it because I thought you would deem it strange for a light to be burning at that hour. I must confess, to both you and the *fray,* that I have been of aid to smugglers at times, and the light was for their guidance."

Don Carlos tossed back his head and laughed, and Fray Luis knew why.

"I forgive you the lie, *señor,* but do not repeat the offense," he warned.

"And have nothing more to do with smugglers, lest you find yourself in serious difficulties," Fray Luis warned. "With your new boat and gear, you are a man of substance and can make a living honestly."

CHAPTER XXIII

A HAT FOR BERNARDO

TOMAS and the fisherman departed, and Fray Luis and Don Carlos went into the chamber to find that Don José had fallen asleep.

"I will remain for a time, my son," Fray Luis said. "I will want to observe his temperature when he awakes, and perhaps put a new dressing on the wound. Do you concern yourself with your duties."

Don Carlos called Bernardo and instructed him to have the saddle horse prepared for a journey, and to saddle the mule and be ready to accompany him. He ate sparingly of the midday meal, for excitement ruined his appetite. He was wondering whether Pedro Pulido had sent word out to the Prado ranch concerning the events of the morning.

But he did not have an opportunity to set out for the *rancho* just then. A

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messenger came from His Excellency the Governor, with official orders for Don Carlos to attend him at the executive house forthwith.

Don Carlos was a little worried at the summons. It could not be ignored. He mounted his horse and rode slowly to the Governor's place, with Bernardo a few feet behind him.

Troopers on guard saluted him as he entered, and a minor official conducted him immediately to the Governor's presence.

"I am glad to greet you, Don Carlos de la Mendoza," His Excellency said. "I have heard of your work as an advocate these recent days, and congratulate you on it."

This was not what Don Carlos had expected, so he merely bowed deeply. This praise might be the cover of a trap, he knew. He would be wary.

"Your Excellency is kind," he said.

The Governor clapped his hands for a servant, and wine was served.

"Don Carlos, I am sure you know how things stand here in Alta California," the Governor said. "I have had letters from Mexico, recommending you to my favor. It appears that I have unconsciously been in league with rascals. A busy executive often must trust others, Don Carlos, and sometimes his trust is betrayed."

"I understand, Your Excellency," Don Carlos said.

He believed he did understand—that His Excellency was now prepared to protect himself at the cost of his friends.

"I THANK you for exposing the true character of Lopez, the trader, and disposing of him. I had thought him a rather uncouth fellow, but adept in matters of trade. I am disturbed by the conduct of Capitán Zubiate, the *commandante,* and am stripping him of rank and elevating another to his post—an honest and capable man.

"Our *magistrado,* Juan Cazzara, is not a bad fellow in some ways, but he is ignorant of the laws, and does not lend the proper dignity to his office. I shall find another post for him and remove him from the court."

Don Carlos merely bowed.

"I have decided to retire from public life, *señor,* and live in ease on my estates."

"Can this be possible, Your Excellency?" Don Carlos asked.

"Keep it in confidence for the time being, Don Carlos. I have already notified the Viceroy, but my successor must be appointed and journey to Alta California. It is my wish to leave things so my successor will find everything as it should be when he comes to take charge."

"I understand, Your Excellency."

"I shall get the house in order. No doubt I have made many errors, and some can be rectified. Don Carlos, I offer you the post of *magistrado* of Monterey, and hope you will accept it."

Don Carlos' eyes narrowed. So, here was the trap.

"Your Excellency, the post was offered me by another a short time ago," Don Carlos said, "but the one who offered it tried to tell me how the office would have to be conducted."

"I am aware of all that, Don Carlos. I am offering you the post honestly, for you are the man fitted for it. I ask that you accept and attend to your duties in a legal and just manner, and grant special favors to none, myself included."

Don Carlos' eyes met those of His Excellency, and he bowed quickly again.

"Then I accept, Your Excellency."

"I am pleased, Don Carlos. You may assume your duties on the morrow. The official notification will be made." The

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Governor extended his hand, and Don Carlos grasped it.

"I will be glad to retire from office," the Governor continued. "It is so easy for a man, embroiled in politics, to be lured away from the path of rectitude. He finds himself in a snare from which he cannot escape.

"I shall be pleased to be in court, Don Carlos, when you assume your duties."

Don Carlos bowed, walked backward to the door and bowed again. He let himself out into the corridor.

He left the building and went slowly down the steps, thinking that now he would stop for a moment to see Pedro Pulido, then ride with speed to the Prado *rancho* to see the *señorita.*

A GROUP had gathered near where Bernardo held the horse and mule, and as Don Carlos approached he saw Capitán Zubiate with some friends around him. The *capitán's* blouse was open at the throat, and some of the insignia of rank had been torn from it.

"Don Carlos, a word with you!" he cried.

"Well, *señor?*" Don Carlos asked.

"It appears that you have upset several men and their careers, *señor.* You should be called to account for it."

"Any careers which have been upset have been tilted over by the men themselves, *señor,*" Don Carlos replied.

"Nevertheless, I call you to account for it," Zubiate raged.

"See me some other time, *señor,* when you are more yourself," Don Carlos urged.

"So the great Mendoza is a coward?" Zubiate cried. "I had thought as much. The blade he wears is but an ornament. Perhaps his dignity is an ornament also. Tricks serve at times, *señor,* but they do not always hide the truth. The masked dancer, for example—"

"Enough, *señor!*" Don Carlos cried. "Stand aside!"

Zubiate whipped out his blade. "On guard, Don Carlos!" he shouted. "Would you have me slap your face as I would slap a poltroon?"

He made a furious onslaught as he finished speaking. Don Carlos lurched aside quickly and avoided the attack. Then his own blade came ringing out of its scabbard.

This could not be avoided, he knew. And a second later, he knew this combat would be no light thing. Zubiate was good with a blade, as Don Carlos realized the moment they engaged.

Men came running across the plaza, to form a big circle and watch. Shouts rang out as news traveled of what was happening. Don Carlos merely sensed these things, for he gave all his attention to his adversary.

He felt the tip of Zubiate's blade touch his left arm, and redoubled his caution. Zubiate was fighting like a madman, which made him doubly dangerous.

Don Carlos retreated before an onslaught, and Zubiate rushed after him. Again, Don Carlos felt the tip of that blade rip the skin of his left forearm. And then he set himself and used his utmost skill. His blade darted and rang, as the sun flashed from it in a thousand reflected rays.

Zubiate made an error of judgment—his last. As Don Carlos whipped his blade back red, the *capitán* reeled, groped, fell asprawl on his face.

"See to him," Don Carlos said. "Give him care for his wound. You are witnesses, *señores,* that he forced the fight on me."

A man stooped over Zubiate. "You got him through the heart, Don Carlos," he reported. "His wound is beyond mending."

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Don Carlos bowed his head a moment, sheathed his sword, and walked slowly toward his horse.

He rode back to his house and told Fray Luis what had happened.

"It could not be avoided, my son," the *fray* said. "Wash your hands of blood. Come to my chapel tomorrow, and we will ask that it be washed from your soul."

PEDRO PULIDO was in his *cantina*, having his servants clean the place and prepare it for the night's trade. He took Don Carlos to the office.

"Fray Luis has told me everything, *señor,*" Don Carlos said. "How can I ever thank you?"

"By helping me aid others, Don Carlos, when the time comes."

"You may depend on me for that, *señor.* All my life I shall feel grateful to you."

"Are you perhaps riding soon to the Prado *rancho?*" Pulido asked.

"As soon as I leave you, *señor.*"

"I have already sent word there of what has occurred, even to the death of Capitán Zubiate. So you will not have to waste time explaining, Don Carlos. You can speak immediately of more pleasant things when you arrive."

. . . Don Carlos did not spare his horse on that journey; and Bernardo, spurring the mule to keep within a decent distance of him, observed that love could make a man travel faster than fear.

Yet Bernardo was glad for it. The Mendoza *casa* no doubt would soon have a mistress, and he would get the hat with the feather in it.

Down the winding lane Don Carlos urged his jaded mount, and vaulted from the saddle in front of the sprawling ranch house before any of the servants could appear.

Don Antonio was sitting in the huge chair with pillows tucked around him.

"Ah, Don Carlos, my boy!" he greeted. "I am indeed happy to see you. Strange news has been coming from Monterey. It seems you have set the place upside down."

"Could I see the *señorita,* Don Antonio?" he asked.

"I have no objections, my boy."

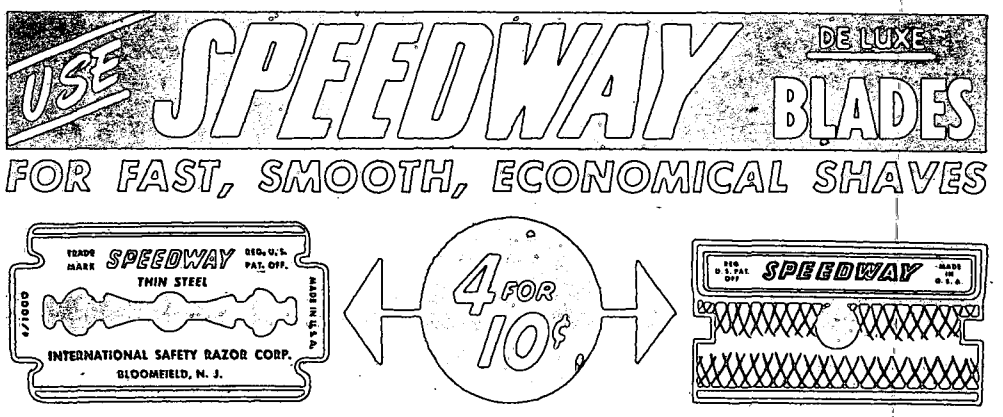
"The last time, she refused to see me, saying that she had a headache."

A burst of silvery laughter answered him, and Don Carlos whirled to find the *señorita* approaching him.

"I have no headache today, *señor.*"

She came on straight toward him, her eyes glistening, her hands outstretched.

THE END



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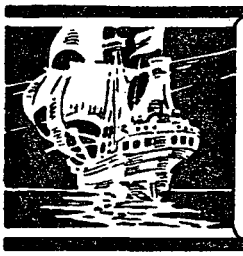

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

THERE'S no room for fooling around this week, because we can't compete with history. (We can't understand it very well, either.) Right now we are sitting back, bewildered but impressed by the erudition of a reader and an author who have come to grips over a matter some six hundred years old. They're genteel, though, as scholars ought to be; note how courteously they discuss such inflammable subjects as the marshes of Old England.

First, here is a gentleman who doubts Roy Horn's geography.

T. G. MACFIE

Mr. Roy de S. Horn is a very promising writer and I read all his stuff with much pleasure. But he is at times mixed up in his geography due to his using a too small scale map. He says in his "Archers to the Front" of the 6th instant, p. 8, that: "From Romney Marsh all the way to the Test estuary the harbor was a mass of shipping and over a thousand ships were assembled here, levied from the Cinque Ports all the way to London."

From Romney Marsh to the Test estuary is over one hundred miles. Romney Marsh is in the southeast of Kent; the Test estuary is in the middle of Hampshire, and the whole length of Sussex comes in between. I know because I walked it as a boy over fifty years ago.

The most easterly of the Cinque Ports, therefore, the nearest to Lincoln, is Sandwich, and from there to London is at least one hundred and fifty miles by sea. . . . Sandwich is about two miles from Richborough, (the ancient Roman port of Rutupiae and the headquarters of the Roman Fleet in England) and probably took its place when the Channel to Rutupiae silted up. The other Cinque Ports are Dover, Romney, Hythe and Hastings, all of them old Roman seaports.

With apologies for troubling you, but Mr. Horn made the same mistake in his first story on this subject and his work is too good to be neglected.

SHARON, PA.

MR. HORN, as you will shortly see, can defend himself nicely against a charge of faulty scholarship. A typographical error did the damage, and of course we should have caught it. But we just don't know anything about fourteenth century woolen marts.

ROY DE S. HORN

Some sad typographical error merely substituted an "n" for an "s", but thereby shifted the place mentioned some two hundred miles up the coast. It was not Romney, the famous old Cinque Port, that I had in mind, but *Romsey*, the market town and famous woolen mart of medieval days, situated in the Test valley about five miles inland from Southampton. Romsey, founded in 910 and mentioned in the Domesday Book, was already a good sized town in 1346.

With that double mischance that always seems to attend typographical errors, I had deliberately created a Romsey marsh to account for the drainage of "Bewly Water" and the fen sections of the New Forest which I described in the first story. I had no idea that it would be transformed into the famous "Romney Marsh" caused by the shifting of the Rother's mouth in the great storm of 1287, and the subsequent silting up of the harbor which eventually injured the harbors not only of Romney but of Winchelsea and Rye as well.

I was particularly glad to have your letter with its identification of the ancient Roman port of Rutupiae with modern Richborough. I am greatly interested in the camps, fortresses, and ports of the Romans in England, and have been making a list of them, with the size and identity of the various legions and auxilia that garrisoned each. I have them all now, I believe.

Incidentally if you have any knowledge of the catastrophe that apparently overwhelmed the

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Legio IX Hispana (Ninth Legion) at Eburacum (York) about 100 A.D., I would greatly appreciate the information. There is evidence from reports of one of the tribunes that serious revolts and disturbances were threatening: "mysterious and weird cries broke out in the amphitheatre during the gladiatorial combats".

At any rate, thereafter this Legion completely vanishes from the lists of the Roman Army and from all history—the only legion in all Roman history which thus strangely disappears without further notice or entry of any sort.

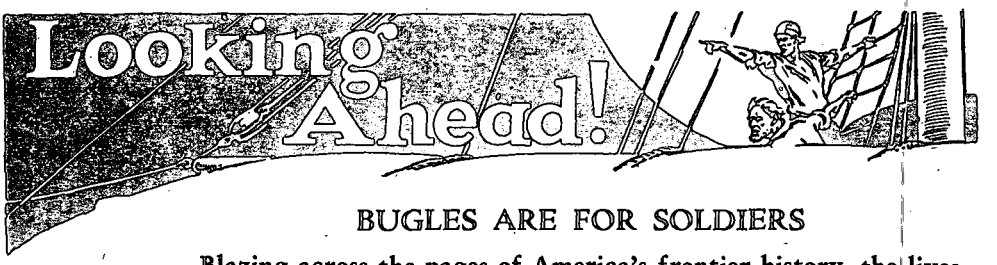
I am glad that you enjoy these stories, because I enjoy writing them. And the appreciation of readers certainly makes up for the vast amount of research and minute detail that is required in creating historical fiction.

Naturally an author has to make certain changes and departures from exact detail in order to make it more comprehensible to readers who are not acquainted with the times and conditions. Manifestly I cannot have the Norman knights and barons of the English army speaking in their customary Norman-French. Likewise I take the romantic author's license of shifting times and peoples and places somewhat, yet, I hope, without damaging the actual picture of the times.

For instance, you probably recognize in my town of "Bewly" the old New Forest borough of Beaulieu. I preferred here to create a composite town, in order to give the readers a picture of an actual walled town, but one which had suffered the devastation that befell so many towns during the disturbances in the reigns of Edward II and Edward III.

Thank you again for your interesting letter.

ANNAPOLIS, MD.



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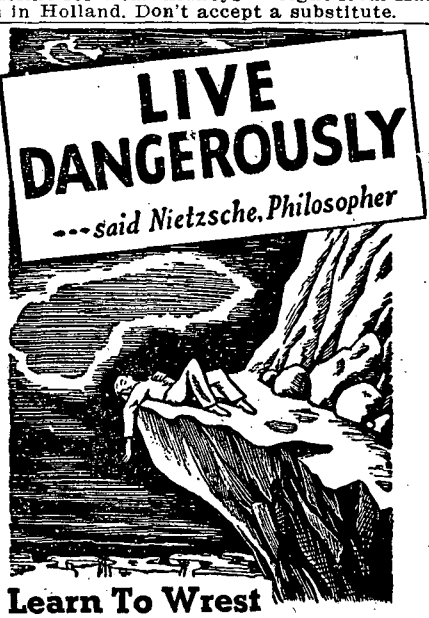

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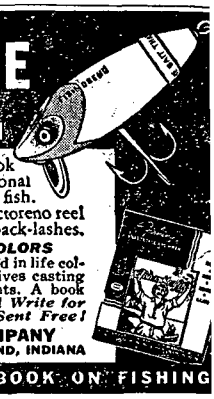

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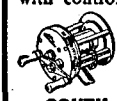

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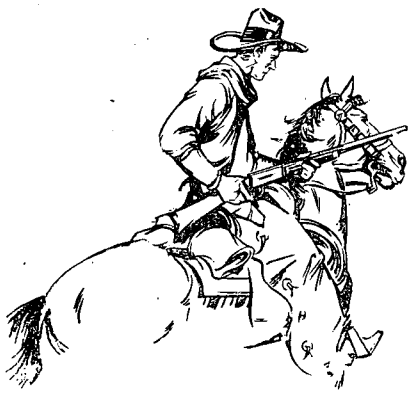

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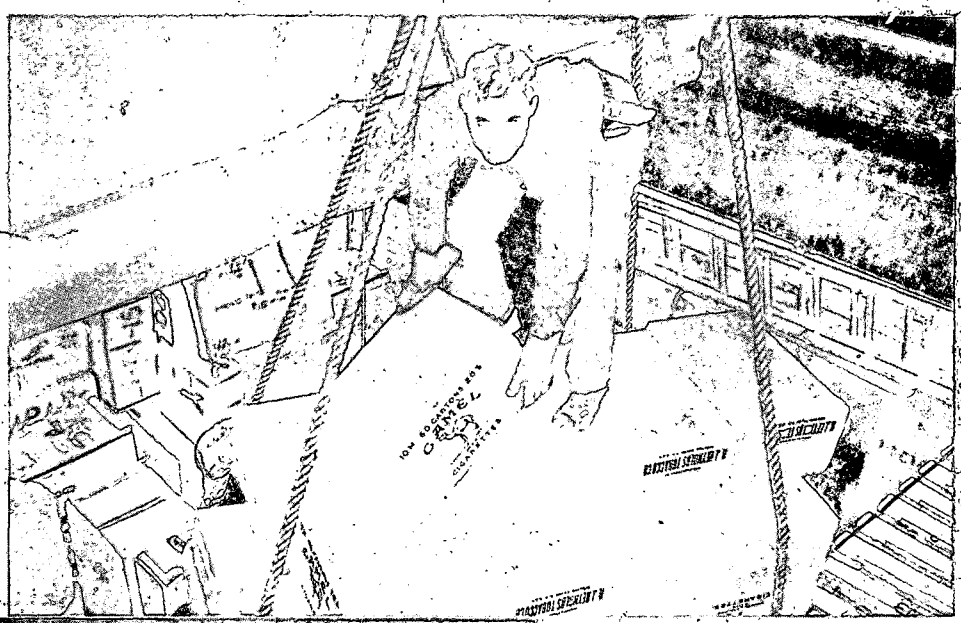

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